OVERLORD 「5」 The men in the Kingdom *Kugane Maruyama*

illustration by so-bin

オーバーロード 5 王国の漢たち 上

丸山くがね

Prologue

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 1, 14:15

He raised his face and saw the darkened clouds covering the sky bleed out a fog of rain. Seeing the world of gray spread out before his eyes, Warrior-Captain Gazef Stronoff clicked his tongue. If only he had left a bit earlier, perhaps he could have avoided this rain. Although he scanned the skies for a clearing, the thick clouds completely enveloped Re-Estize, the Kingdom's capital and showed no signs of abating even if he were to wait.

Having abandoned the notion of waiting it out inside the palace, he donned the hood attached to his coat and stepped out into the downpour. He passed through the palace gate's guards with only a flash of his face and headed towards the center of the capital.

Normally, the place would be overflowing with life, but the usual bustle of activity was nowhere to be found. Instead, it was replaced by the scant number of people moving about, careful not to slip on the wet surface.

Seeing his empty surroundings, he could guess how long this rain had been falling. *Can't be helped then. Leaving a bit sooner wouldn't have made a difference.* With his coat steadily growing heavy from the water, he brushed past the other pedestrians in mutual silence. Although his jacket was able to serve as a raincoat, the wet sensation of it clinging to his back made it uncomfortable. Gazef quickened his stride and headed for home.

As his house grew closer, the fact that he would soon be liberated from his drenched coat brought a sigh of relief to Gazef's lips. Suddenly, his senses were drawn to the side. His vision shadowed by a thin veil, a narrow road veering off to his right. There, seemingly uncaring of his soaked body, was a ragged man plopped down on the side of the road.

Appearing to have roughly dyed his hair, patches of his natural hair color could be seen all over his head. His hair was drenched and clung to his forehead, dripping droplets of water from his locks. His face was slightly bent downwards and hidden from view.

The reason Gazef stopped his eyes on the man was not because he thought it odd for someone to be outside without a proper coat in this rain. Rather, he felt that something else was out of place. His eyes darted especially to the man's right hand.

Like a child grasping onto the hand of his mother, the man held a weapon that did not match with his ragged appearance. It was a very rare weapon called a 'katana', crafted in a city located within a desert in the far off south.

He's holding a katana… A thief…? No. This feeling I'm getting from him is different. Am I feeling glad to see him? Gazef felt that something was off, like a coat with mismatched buttons. With his feet planted, Gazef stared earnestly at the man's profile. At that moment, his memory resurfaced like a surging wave.

“Is that you… Unglaus?” As soon as the words left his mouth, his mind was filled with doubt. The man he faced in the finals of the palace tournament, Brain Unglaus. Even now, the appearance of the man with whom he fought a close match was engraved in Gazef’s mind.

Quite possibly the strongest opponent he has faced since first picking up the sword and living his life as a warrior— and even if it was one sided, it was the face of a man he considered to be his rival. That’s right. The man’s gaunt profile matched almost exactly with the face from his memories.

However— that was impossible. Without a doubt, their faces were very similar. Even if the passage of time changed his appearance, traces of his past self were still apparent. But the man from Gazef’s memories did not have such a pitiful countenance. He was a man who was filled to the brim with confidence in his sword and a fighting spirit that burned violently like fire. He did not have the look of a wet dog like this man before him.

With the sound of splashing water, Gazef walked towards him. As if responding to the sound, the man slowly looked up. Gazef felt his breath fall short. Looking at him from the front, he was now certain. This man was Brain Unglaus, the genius of the sword. However, the light from the past was gone. The Brain that was in front of him was a defeated man with his will completely broken.

Brain staggered to his feet. This dull, languid movement was not that of a warrior. It was difficult to even call it the movement of an old soldier. With eyes downcast, the man turned around without a word, trudging away. As his back grew smaller in the rain, Gazef was struck by an ominous foreboding that if they parted here, he would never see him again. He closed the distance that grew between them while shouting.

“Unglaus! Brain Unglaus!” If the man denied it, he would decide that the two simply looked similar and admonish himself. However, a tiny voice flowed into Gazef’s ears. “…Stronoff.” It was a lifeless voice, one that could not possibly have belonged to the Brain of his memories whom he crossed swords with.

“What, what happened?” Dumbfounded, he asked. Just what exactly was happening? Of course, anyone could have their life ruined and fall on hard times. Gazef had seen countless examples of such people. A man who always chose the easy way out could lose everything from just one failure.

But was he such a man? The sword genius, Brain Unglaus; it was completely unthinkable. Perhaps this was simply born from his own sentiment of not wishing to see the strongest opponent of his past reduced to such a disgrace.

The two men met eyes. *How can he make such a face…?* With gaunt cheeks, he had dark bags under his eyes. His eyes were deathly pale and devoid of all energy. The man was like a corpse. *No, even a corpse would be better than this… Unglaus is dead on his feet…*

“…Stronoff. I’m broken.”

“What?” From his words, the first thing Gazef looked to was the katana that Brain held in his hand. But he soon realized that wasn’t it. What was broken wasn’t the katana, but—

“Hey, are we strong?” He couldn’t say yes. The incident in Carne village flashed across Gazef’s mind. The mysterious magic caster, Ainz Ooal Gown; had he not come to his aid, both him and his soldiers would have perished. Even with the title of the strongest in the kingdom, that was all he amounted to. He could never call himself strong with his head held high.

To his silence, Brain continued to speak. “Weak. We’re weak. After all, we’re only human. We humans are inferior.” Humans are indeed weak. Compared to something like the strongest race, dragons, the difference was clear. Humans do not have hard scales, razor-sharp claws, wings that soared through the skies, Breath that obliterated everything; these were everything that humans did not possess.

That was why warriors held Dragon Slayers in high esteem. With their trained skills, weapons, and allies, there was glory in overcoming great odds and bringing down such a race. It was a merit allowed only to the warriors who could be described as ‘exceptional.’ Then could Brain have fought a ‘Dragon’ and lost? He stretched out his hand to a place that was beyond his reach and failed; lost his balance and plummeted back to the earth.

“…What are you saying. Any warrior would understand that humans are weak.” That’s right. He couldn’t understand. Anyone would know that a world for the strong existed. Even if he was called the strongest by the surrounding countries, Gazef held doubts about whether that was really true.

For instance, there was a high possibility that the empire could be hiding a warrior who was stronger than Gazef. Not only that, the physical strength of demi-humans like Ogres and Giants far exceeded that of his own. If demi-humans ever gained even the roughest semblance of technique, Gazef would not be able to defeat them. That world might be invisible to him, but Gazef was still fully aware of its existence. A fact that could even be considered common sense to any warrior, did Brain truly not know?

“There is a world where only the strong exist. Are we not training so we can win against such foes?” With hope that one day, they will reach them. But Brain emphatically shook his head, causing his drenched hair to fling droplets of water to his surroundings. “No! That’s not the level that I’m talking about!” A shout like coughing up blood.

The man before him overlapped with his image from Gazef’s memories. Despite his energy seeming to be directed in the complete opposite direction when compared to back then, it was the same spirit as when they crossed swords.

“Stronoff! We can never reach the world of the truly powerful, no matter how hard we try. As long as we’re born human, this is the truth. In the end, we’re just children holding sticks. We’re playing with swords now, but we are still mere children pretending to be swordsmen.”

A calm expression that lost all traces of emotion stared at Gazef. “…Listen, Stronoff. You should be confident in your sword too, right? But… that’s garbage. All you’re doing is deluding yourself if you think that you’ve been protecting these people with that useless thing in your hand.”

“…Was the peak you saw really that high?”

“I saw it and realized; a height that humans can never reach. Actually—” Brain let out a self-mocking laughter. “What I saw was just a glimpse. I was too weak to see the actual pinnacle, you see. It was like child’s play, hilarious.”

“Then if you were to train so you could see that world…”

Brain’s face twisted in anger. “You don’t know anything! You can’t ever reach that monster’s level, not with a human body. Even if you were to swing the sword without end, it’s obvious that it still wouldn’t do any good! …Useless. Just what was I aiming for all this time?”

Gazef could say nothing. He had seen a person whose heart was this wounded. A person whose heart was shattered from seeing his comrades die in front of him. There was no way to save such a person. He cannot be saved by others. Without the will to stand with their own strength, any attempts to help him would only be futile.

“…Unglaus.”

“…Stronoff. Strength achieved from the sword really is garbage. It’s useless in front of true power.” As expected, those words showed no signs of his past splendor. “…I’m glad to have met you in the end.” As Brain turned his back and walked away, Gazef stared at him with pained eyes. The pitiful figure of his once greatest rival with his heart in tatters. Gazef could no longer find the energy to speak to him. However, he did not miss the short phrase that he heard as they parted.

“Now… I can die.”

“Stop! Wait, Brain Unglaus!” He shouted feverishly to Brain’s back. He ran up to him and grabbed his shoulder, turning him around. His staggering appearance no longer had the light from the past.

However, despite the fact that Gazef pulled him with all of his strength, Brain’s posture did not falter nor collapse. It was proof that he possessed both a well-trained lower body and an outstanding sense of balance. Gazef felt a small relief. In the end, his skill had not rusted. It still wasn’t too late. He couldn’t leave him to his death.

“…What are you doing.”

“Come with me to my home.”

“Forget it. Don’t try to stop me. I want to die… I’m done with being scared. I don’t want to be constantly looking over my shoulder, frightened by shadows. I don’t want to face reality anymore. And to think I used to be content with this trash in my hand.”

Hearing Brain’s pleading voice, Gazef felt his irritation swell up inside him. “Shut up and follow me.” And with that, Gazef began to walk while holding onto Brain’s arm. Seeing how Brain followed with faltering steps, without putting up resistance, Gazef felt a sense of displeasure that he couldn’t describe with words. “After you change your clothes and eat something, immediately get some rest.”

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Month of Equinox Fire (Month 8), Day 26, 13:45

The Kingdom of Re-Estize and its capital, Re-Estize. A country with a total population of 9 million, 'old' would be the best way to describe its capital. A place of history, the unchanging daily life, a dirty city that hides under the guise of antiquity, a static city— the place held various such meanings.

It was something that could be easily understood with a simple stroll through town. Aside from the few actual houses on either side, the apparent harshness of the surroundings meant that freshness or splendor was sorely lacking. However, how this was interpreted was different depending on the individual. Indeed, there may be those who see it as the tranquil atmosphere of a land rich with history. Others could see it as a dull city, endless in its stagnation.

It looked as if the capital would continue to exist as is, even if there was nothing that was immune to change. The capital had many roads that were left unpaved. Because of this, in the event that such places became wet from the rain, they would turn into mires that raised doubts over whether one was truly inside a city. This did not mean that the Kingdom was poor. You could not compare them with places like the Theocracy or Empire.

With the roads being narrow, people did not walk in the middle of the path — in the way of the carriages — instead, they squeezed through the sides in a disorderly manner. The Kingdom's citizens were already used to such congestion and walked like they were trying to slip through the cracks, skillfully avoiding others heading in the opposite direction.

Despite this, the path Sebas was taking was different from the norm in that it was wide and paved with the seldom seen stone blocks. The reason was obvious with a glance of the surroundings. As the central road of the capital, the houses that were lined up side-by-side were large and magnificent, radiating a feeling of wealth.

As Sebas walked briskly with a dignified air, followed by the eyes of various middle-aged women and young ladies charmed by his elegance. Though there was the occasional woman who would brazenly send him a sultry gaze to his face, Sebas paid them no mind. With an upright back and steady eyes directed straight ahead, his feet did not falter for even a moment.

The feet that seemed to show no signs of stopping until it reached its destination suddenly halted and focused its attention on the carriage that was approaching from the side. It then turned ninety degrees and crossed the road.

At the place he was heading to was an old woman. She was sitting next to a bulky carrying frame while massaging her ankles. "Is there a problem?" Surprised at having been suddenly approached by a stranger, the old woman raised her face, revealing a pair of wary eyes. But that suspicion immediately weakened upon seeing Sebas' appearance and elegant attire.

"You seem to be having trouble. Is there any way I can be of assistance?"

"N-no sir. Not at all."

“Please do not let it bother you. Extending a hand to those in need is a matter of course.” Sebas showed a bright smile, causing the old woman to blush. The handsome smile from the gentleman overflowing with charisma shattered her last vestige of defense.

Having finished peddling from her street stall, the old woman was returning home when she sprained her ankle and had found herself in a difficult situation. Even though the area around the road generally maintained a decent public order, it didn’t mean that the people who traversed here were all law-abiding citizens.

It was still possible to run into bad luck by asking the wrong type of people for help and end up losing both the money and goods. Knowing that such incidents were reality, the old woman could not blindly ask for help and was at a loss.

Then it was simple. “I will accompany you. May I ask you to guide me?”

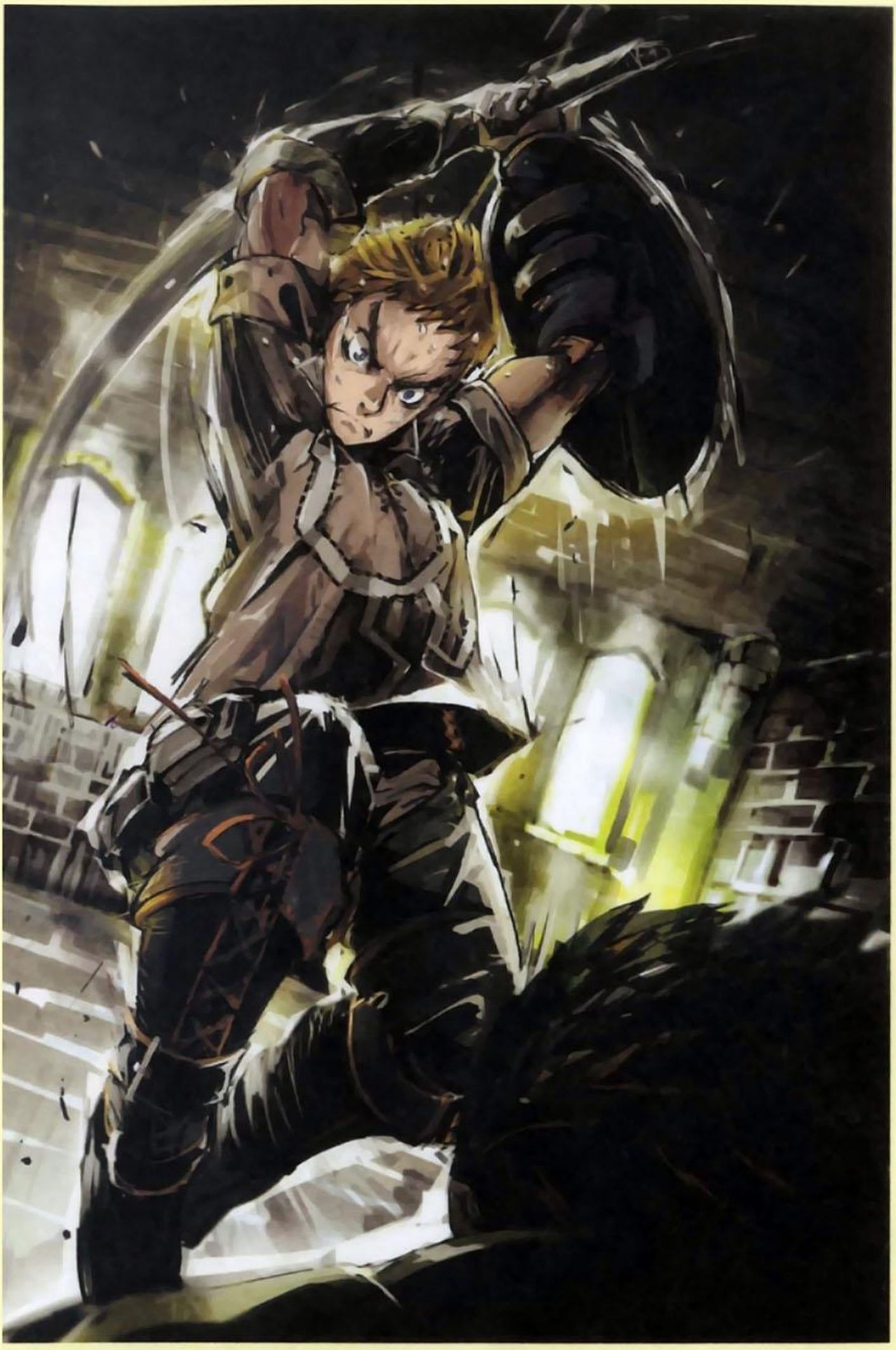
“Good sir, will that really be alright?!”

“Of course. It is customary to help those in need.” Sebas turned his back to the old woman who was thanking him repeatedly. “Then, please get on.”

“T-That’s…” The old woman’s embarrassed voice. “I’ll end up dirtying your clothes!” However—

Sebas showed a kind smile. Just how was having one’s clothes dirtied significant? Something like that did not even merit a cause for concern when helping others. He was suddenly reminded of his comrades in the Great Tomb of Nazarick. Their strange expressions; scowling faces that showed clear contempt. And at the head would be Demiurge. But no matter what he may say, Sebas firmly believed that this was right.

Helping others was the right thing to do. Having convinced the old woman through her repeated refusal, he carried her on his back and lifted the luggage with one hand. The sight of him lifting such a heavy object without even a falter drew a sigh of awe from not only the old woman, but from those around them. With her as his guide, Sebas began to walk.



1章 少年の思い

Chapter 1: A Boy's Feelings

Part 1

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 2, 23:30

The man lit the lantern hanging from his waist. The special oil gave rise to a green flame that dyed the surroundings with a ghastly hue. He stepped outside, feeling the heat seep into his body. Though the man wore a bitter expression, he had to attest at least this much to the season. Even when the sun wasn't up, at this time of the day, everywhere in the Kingdom was humid from the heat. With that said, the worst of it was supposed to have passed and the days to get steadily cooler. Not even the smallest sign of this could be found anywhere.

"Man~ it's hot today too."

"No kidding. They say it's supposed to be cooler up a bit north, near the ocean." The man's partner for the night said in response to his grumbling. "If it rained then this heat might ease up a bit." He looked to the sky as he spoke but saw only clear skies with no trace of even a single cloud in sight, let alone rain clouds. The stars shining brightly overhead, it was the familiar sight of the night sky.

"Seriously, I wish we'd get a good squall… Well, let's get to work." The two men had an air about them that made it difficult to call them ordinary villagers. First was their equipment. A long sword at their waist and leather armor— their gear was too excessive for a village militia. Not only that, their face and body did not belong to those who worked the fields. Rather, they held the dangerous aura of people well versed in violence.

The two men walked into the village without exchanging a single word. Silent under the darkness, the only sounds that could be heard in the village were their footsteps. A veritable ghost town. With great strides, the two men calmly walked through that creepy atmosphere. Their composure was proof that this was routine.

The village that these men were walking through was surrounded by tall walls and even with a cursory glance, one could see six watchtowers. It was difficult to find such strong fortifications even amongst the frontier villages where monsters were more likely to appear. Rather than calling it a village, it was more accurate to describe it as a military base. Though with that said, a third party may see it simply as just another village with tight security.

However, the scene that would follow next would make them furrow their brows. That was how much of a peculiar sight it was. Normally, a wall would encompass the residential buildings or storage warehouses while the fields were spread out outside. Plowing the fields inside the walls would require an incredible amount of work in order to surround all of the vast farmland. However, this village had surrounded the verdant grass swaying in the wind and was guarding them as if they were made of gold.

The man who was walking in that eccentric town felt someone's eyes on him from one of the watchtowers. In reality, it should be his comrade equipped with a bow. If something were to

happen, he could receive help by shaking his lantern above his head. Considering his comrade's skill with the bow, he would pass on his covering fire. Rather, just ringing the bell to wake the others was all he needed to feel secure.

But if he happened to accidentally use the signal, he would have to suffer through his comrades who were fast asleep. Despite this, the man was ready to shake the lantern as soon as he felt even the slightest suspicion. After all, he didn't want to lose his life. With that said, it was doubtful that such a situation would arise. He had repeated this same job for the past couple of months and would continue to do so.

As he circled exactly half way through his patrol route, something like a snake struck the man's mouth. No, it wasn't a snake. The thing that had latched onto the man's mouth and would not budge was a tentacle of an octopus. His chin was forced upwards and followed by a searing pain on the exposed neck. Everything up to this point didn't even take a second.

A sucking noise flowed from his neck. It was the last sound the man would hear in his life. The hand that was on the man's mouth released its grip. His back, supported from behind so the body would not fall. After confirming that the blade had absorbed the blood, the magic weapon, 'Vampire Blade' was pulled out.

The one hugging the man from behind was a figure covered in pitch black attire. Aside from the eyes, the whole face was hidden and the entire body was covered in black garment. The fabric itself was made of cloth but the gauntlets and greaves on the arm and legs augmented its defense. Same for the chest, it was covered with a metal plate but the female curvature was plain to see and easily recognizable.

Similarly, behind the other man was a figure wearing the same outfit. This side also had an uplifted metal plate covering the chest. The eyes turned to the other side and nodded once. Having confirmed that the assassination was successful, she checked her surroundings. There was no sign that they were detected, a small room for relief in the corner of her mind.

Even with the light from the lantern, they were sticking so perfectly close to the bodies that it was difficult to tell the difference from the watchtower. The only cause for concern was the instant they attacked— the short distance covered while moving between shadows, 'Dark Crossing.' But even that concern was over and done with.

With the dagger reddened from drinking the blood still lodged inside, she propped up the body that was about to collapse. To the people in the watchtower, it would look as if the man patrolling had paused for a bit. Regardless, standing so stiffly like this or falling over would definitely rouse suspicion. Then it was necessary to immediately move on to the next phase. However, that was not her role.

The woman felt a sensation in her hands; the feeling of the man's lifeless body growing stiff, as if the inside was propped up by a pillar. As if confirming that she wasn't mistaken, in the next moment, the man's body jerked. Even when the dead body moved, there wasn't even a shred of surprise. Everything was going according to plan.

The woman released her hands and at the same time, launched a skill. One of the skills she learned from her Ninja class, 'Hide Shadow.' As long as a shadow existed, one could completely meld into it and render detection impossible with the naked eye.

Leaving behind the two who were now completely hidden in shadow, the men started to walk forward as if they had just been released from chains. They were returning to continue their patrol route. It was as if they had just remembered their original task. But the speed of their gait was clumsy and heavy. Even if their wound wasn't finished healing, fresh blood did not seep from the slash on their necks because all of their blood had been drained.

There was only one reason that they could still move. They had become zombies and were now following the orders of their creator. The one who turned them were not the women. Looking at it normally, the only people present here were the two men. Even if someone were to see past their concealment ability, there would still be no more than four people. However, there was a fifth. That unseen fifth figure was the one responsible for the zombies. That figure was invisible even to the women. But their ninjutsu allowed the two to detect hidden presences by using magic or skills. This ability reacted to the one before them.

"Preparations here are complete."

"Perfect." Low voices rang out and a small voice soon answered in response. "I know since I'm watching. I'll move to the next location. I have to capture the one with highest authority here." This was also a female voice. But this one had a high-pitch tone that lacked maturity and exuded the feeling of a child.

"Then our side will start the attack. What about the other two?"

"Don't tell me they're playing around somewhere since they don't get a turn?"

"No way. They're hiding outside, near the village. The plan is for them to mount an attack from the front and rear if there's an emergency. Alright then. I'll be moving to our top priority. You two follow the plan as well."

Their invisible comrade — even if it's just her presence — rose into the air. She was moving through the air using 'Flight'. The presence that grew farther and farther away soon disappeared towards the building that she referred to as the top priority. It was one of the few buildings that existed in the village as well as a key location that needed to be secured first and foremost.

Normally, they would want to prioritize a different building. But the reason that place in particular was a priority was because of the 'Message' magic. There are many who shirk this magic, calling it unreliable. At the same time, there are those who are unconcerned and use it regardless. The Empire that is ahead of even the Kingdom when it comes to nurturing the growth of magic casters, those who want information as soon as possible, and the enemy who rules this village.

As such, it was necessary to first secure the liaison agent located in that building. Now that their comrade was headed there, they also had to lie in wait at their assigned location. Everyone had to match the timing and finish their assault while they were still undetected.

The two ninjas exhaled and ran onwards. Moving to and fro in the darkness, they would be invisible to an ordinary person. No, if they used their equipped magic item as well, even adventurers would have a hard time spotting them. In other words, there was no one in the village who could see the two women with their eyes. Her comrade who was running at her side skillfully moved her fingers. Although it looked as if she was just wriggling them around, the other who saw it read their meaning—

"It's fortunate that they don't have any dogs." She answered 'agreed' with her fingers. It was a sign language used by assassins. At their level of expertise, they could communicate as fast as they could speak. Although they had taught it to their other allies, regrettably, the best they could manage were simple phrases or commands. On the other hand, both the speed and vocabulary of their signing was at a level where they could have daily conversations and would often use them to have secret chats with one another.

"I know what you mean. It makes this easier since they won't be attracted to the scent of blood." If the enemy had hounds, then this would not have been this easy. Although they had prepared ways to incapacitate them, nothing was more welcomed than avoiding needless work. As soon as she replied, her comrade's fingers moved rapidly.

"Then I'll be heading to my target building." As soon as she answered affirmative, the comrade who had been running by her side split from her. Now alone, she looked at the fields with her peripheral vision while running at high speed. What was being cultivated was not a grain like barley or vegetables.

It was the raw ingredient plant of the illegal and most prevalent drug in the Kingdom, Black Dust. Surrounded by these tall walls, the many fields in the village all grew the same plant. It was proof that this village was one of the bases for growing these drugs.

Black Dust, also called Laira Powder, this drug was a dark powder that was mixed and taken with water. It was easy to mass produce and thus sold cheaply. Thanks to the easy high and euphoria, it was the most famous drug in the Kingdom. Not only that, there were many who believed that the drug was not addictive and that it had no side effects, causing it to be spread far and wide.

She remembered that fake information and snorted back a laugh. A drug like that did not exist anywhere. 'I can quit whenever I want' was it? There should be a limit to such naivety. The results from testing the fluids from a black dust addict had shown that the user's brain had shriveled to about eighty percent of the average brain size. Made from a plant that originally grew in the wild, Black Dust is a powerful drug. It is a wonder how people can believe that such a poisonous plant would not be addicting.

The reason that the Black Dust circulating through the town is listed as an anesthetic is because the cultivated plants that it was made from was less potent. Nevertheless, the drug was still powerfully addicting and took a long time for it to completely leave the user's system. As a result, it would often be the case that the addict takes the drug again before it has a chance to leave the body. If Bishops do not use magic to forcefully draw it out, the addict will eventually reach a stage in their addiction where it will be nearly impossible to completely quit of their own volition.

The troublesome part of the frightening drug was that it had weak withdrawal symptoms. Even if an addict experiences a bad trip, they will not react violently or cause harm to their surroundings.

That was why the Kingdom's higher-ups did not truly understand its dangers and mostly ignored the Black Dust. Instead, they opt to focus their efforts on exposing other drugs. It is no wonder that the Empire even suspects that the Kingdom may be secretly aiding in its production.

During her days spent living as an assassin, she had used drugs if the situation called for it. And because her organization had cultivated similar plants as well, she didn't have any ill feelings on the matter. Even drugs can be greatly effective if used with caution. They were not too different from a medicinal plant with dangerous side effects, so to speak. However, this was a request and her personal opinions were not a problem. Only that—

…Requests that aren't made through the Adventurer Guild are dangerous. She frowned beneath the mask. The client this time was a friend of the team leader. Despite the adequate reward, accepting a request that bypasses the guild could have troublesome repercussions in the future. Even if they were one of the only two adamantite rank adventurer teams in the Kingdom.

Hmm? Was it three now? Now that she mentioned it, she remembered hearing that a new adamantite rank team was formed— whilst having such thoughts, the woman arrived near the building that they had codenamed No. 2. Her role was to collect every scrap of information in this building. Afterwards, she was to set fire to the field.

Although it was true that the smoke from the burning plants was poisonous, it had to be done in order for her to complete her mission. Depending on the wind, it may even end up affecting the villagers. There was neither the time nor method for evacuation.

Necessary sacrifice. Having told herself as much, she tossed aside the safety of the villagers. Raised as an assassin, the loss of human life almost never affected her emotionally. She wouldn't even bat an eye, especially if they were strangers. She only disliked the leader's expression when there were casualties. But since this plan had the leader's approval, she did not feel even a shred of desire to go save them.

And more importantly, they had to use teleportation magic as soon as the attack was over so they could move to another village and repeat the job. Her head was filled with nothing but thoughts about the plan.

This was not the only village where the ingredient for the drug was being cultivated. According to their investigations, there were twelve large scale plantations in the Kingdom. Most likely, there were still more that they have yet to find. Otherwise, there was no way to explain the amount of the drug that has spread throughout the Kingdom's lands.

Weeds have to be pulled as soon as they sprout… Even if a lot of it is fruitless, it's the only way. If they found something like written orders in this village then that would be a stroke of luck. Regrettably, it was never that easy. They could only hope that the one in charge of this village would know something.

The leader will be happy if we can get even a small piece of information on the organization. The powerful syndicate that cultivated the drug was named 'Eight Fingers,' named after the eight fingers of the God of Theft, subordinate of the God of Earth. They were the group that controlled the underworld of the Kingdom.

The criminal organization was divided into eight categories: slave trafficking, assassinations, smuggling, larceny, drug trade, security, banking, and gambling. Their reach extended to every criminal group in the Kingdom and the sheer size of the organization meant that they were shrouded in mystery. On the other hand, what was plain to see was how much influence they wielded in the Kingdom. The village sprawled out before her was proof of that.

They cultivate illegal plants in plain sight. That alone was enough to implicate the noble of the land as an accomplice. But charging him would not lead to a conviction. It would be a different story if the royal family or someone from the judicial authority were to investigate the matter. But even so, it would be difficult to reach a guilty verdict when it involved the feudal aristocracy. The nobles of this land will claim that they did not know that the plant could be used as an ingredient to drugs. They may even accuse the villagers of acting on their own volition in order to shift the blame.

Public denouncement was ineffective and trying to forcibly curb the circulation of the drug was almost impossible with the organization bribing the nobles with influence over the distribution channels. That was why the only option left was violence, burning the fields as a last resort. In all honesty, she believed that even if she burned the drugs here, it wouldn't even make a dent in their operations. With their fingers even in politics, that was how powerful the organization was. "A bid for time… If we don't make a decisive attack someday, then even this will be useless."

Part 2

It was raining, accompanied by the noisy ringing in the ears. The Kingdom did not build its roads with particular attention to drainage, especially when it came to back alleyways. The result was that an entire roadway could transform into a huge lake.

The rain falling on the surface of the lake splashed about, the wind carrying the scent of water and spraying it into the air. It was a part of the reason why the whole Kingdom exuded an atmosphere of being submerged underwater.

Within the world dyed in gray by the sprays of water was a single boy. He was living in a deserted house. No, even calling it such was doing it a service. Its pillar was wood that was only as thick as a man's arm. Rags were used in place of a roof and the only walls to speak of were simply the rags draping over the sides.

In the residence that was no different from sleeping in the open was a six-year-old boy. Like garbage that has been carelessly tossed aside, he was curled into a ball and lying on top of a thin cloth. The wood acting as a pillar, the rags serving as both the roof and walls, they seemed like the sort a child his age would build as a secret base.

This house that was no different from being outside, it's only merit was the shelter it provided from the rain. The sharp drop in temperature from the unending rain wrapped the boy in a chill that caused his body to shiver uncontrollably. The warmth of his breath that confirmed his existence was immediately robbed of its temperature and vanished into the air.

Before he had fled into the house, the rain had soaked the boy and he was now losing his body heat, fast. There was no way to stop his body from shivering. The chill seeping into his body

soothed the bruises he got from a beating. Perhaps this was his one, small happiness in this worst case scenario.

The boy lay on his side and stared at the empty alleyway, at the world. The only sounds he could hear were the rain and that of his own breathing. It was a stillness that made it seem like he was the only one in the world. Although he was young, the boy knew that he was probably going to die.

He was not of an age to fully understand the meaning of death and thus did not feel too afraid. He also didn't feel as if there was anything worth living for. The only reason he clung to life up until now was because he didn't like pain, almost like an escape.

Although it was cold, if he could die painlessly like this, then death wasn't so bad. As his drenched body grew numb, his consciousness began to fade. He should have found a place that would shield him from the billowing wind. But he was grabbed by a group of hoodlums and his current place was the best he could manage with his battered body.

He had a small happiness. Then was everything else misfortune? His mouth hadn't touched food in two days, but something like that was normal so it wasn't misfortune. His parents were gone so he was alone with no one to take care of him. But it had been like that for a long time so it wasn't misfortune.

The unpleasant odor around him also wasn't misfortune. After all, it was from the rags so it couldn't be helped. The life that revolved around filling his stomach with rotten food and foul water also wasn't misfortune since it was all he knew.

Then the empty house where he was comfortable, the home he toiled to build that was trashed by someone in jest, his bruised body aching from the beating from the drunkards, were they misfortune?

No. The boy's misfortune was such that he was unable to see it for what it was. But even that was over. The misfortune that the boy was ignorant to was to end here. Death comes to fortunate and unfortunate alike. Indeed. Death is absolute. He closed his eyes. For his body that could no longer feel the cold, even keeping his eyes open was a chore.

He could hear the small, unreliable sound of his own heartbeat from the darkness. In the world where the only noise he could hear was the rain and his own heart, a strange sound was mixed in. The noise seemed to block the rain. In his fading consciousness, a child's curiosity drove the boy to channel strength into his eyelids.

In his vision narrow like a string, it was reflected. The boy opened his eyes wide. It was beautiful. For a moment, he did not understand what he was looking at. 'Like a jewel, a lump of gold.' Such expressions would have been fitting. But someone who sated their hunger on half rotten foods from the trash could not think of such words.

That's right. There was only one thought that ran through his mind. The sun. The most beautiful object in his world and at the same time, the furthest from his reach. The world dyed gray from the rain, the dark rainclouds covering the sky. Perhaps they were the ones responsible. The sun

left for a trip because no one was there to see it and returned, appearing in front of his eyes. That was what he thought. A hand stretched out and stroked his face. And—

Until now, the boy was not a human. No one ever saw him as such. But on that day, he became human.

♦ ♦ ♦

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 4:15

Located in the deepest area of the capital of the Re-Estize Kingdom was Ro-Lente castle. Its walls surrounded a vast stretch of land measuring 1,400 meters with a protective ring of twelve enormous cylindrical guard towers.

The room was located inside one of these twelve towers. With all of its lights turned off, a person was lying on the one bed in the room. He was of a delicate age, the boundary between boy and man. His blond hair was cut short and his tanned skin gave off a healthy complexion.

Climb. With no surname, he was the one who was granted permission to stand closest to the girl called the 'Golden Princess,' a soldier who invited the jealousy of many. He wakes even before the sun rises.

The moment he regained consciousness from the world of darkness, his mind immediately turns sharp and his bodily functions almost completely recovers. Sleeping well and waking up promptly was one of the things that Climb took pride in.

His sanpaku eyes opened wide, revealing an iron-like will etched within them. Climb pushed aside the thick blanket covering his body and stood. Even in the summer, the stone walls surrounding him meant that the nights were still cold. He rubbed his eyes and found that his fingers came away wet.

"…That dream again." Climb used his sleeves to wipe the tears from his face. A memory from when he was a boy, the heavy rain from two days ago must have been what caused him to remember. The tears were not from sorrow. How many times in a person's life will he meet someone worthy of respect? A person who you are willing to throw away your life for in servitude… just how many?

The girl Climb met on that day was such a person. These were tears of joy, tears thanking the miracle that was created from their meeting. Climb stood, his face showing a strong determination and a youthful energy befitting of his age. His voice, rough from excessive training, recited a word.

"Light." The lamp hanging from the ceiling responded to the keyword and illuminated the inside of the room with a white light. A magic item enchanted with 'Continual Light'. Even though they were used widely, the reason he was given such an expensive item wasn't because of his special position.

Even if it was for light, burning something in a tower made of stone, with its poor air flow, was unsafe. That was why almost every room was provided with a magic light source, despite the initial development costs.

The floor and walls illuminated by the light were made of stone. A thin carpet was laid out in a futile attempt to cover the cold, hard surface. Aside from that, the furnishings in the room included a shoddy wooden bed, a slightly larger closet to accommodate weapons and armor, a desk with drawers, and a thin cushion resting on a wooden chair. An outsider looking in would think of it as unimpressive, but to others who were of Climb's rank, it was an incredibly envious treatment.

Soldiers did not get private quarters. They were placed into a large room with bunk beds. Excluding the beds themselves, the only furniture the soldiers were given was a wooden chest with a lock for storing their personal belongings. Also, in a corner of the room rested a white full plate armor. The spotless armor had a gloss that made it look as if it was shining. No foot soldier would ever be granted such equipment.

This special treatment was not something that Climb had earned with his own strength, but rather a sign of favor from the master whom he swore his life to. As such, it would be impossible to not invite jealousy from others.

He opened the closet and changed while staring at the mirror attached inside. Having changed into his worn clothes that smelled of metal, he then donned the chain shirt over the rest of his attire. Normally this would be where he put on his plate armor, but instead, he opted for a vest with numerous pockets and finished with a pair of trousers. In his hand was a wooden stick wrapped in towel.

Lastly, he looked himself over in the mirror, checking for anything that was amiss, making sure that his gear was tidy. Any fault in Climb could potentially become a weapon to hurt his master, "Golden Princess" Renner. That was why he must always be on alert. His reason for living wasn't to cause her harm. It was to pledge his all to her. Climb closed his eyes in front of the mirror and thought of his master's face.

Golden Princess – Renner Theiere Chardelon Ryle Vaiself. As kind as a goddess, a benevolent and radiant mind befitting her royal blood, and wisdom that devised many types of policies. In the truest sense of the word, a noble amongst nobles, the greatest woman. Possessing the brilliance of gold, nothing can be allowed to blemish such a flawless gem.

If one were to compare her to a ring, Renner would be akin to huge, brilliantly cut diamond. Then what was Climb? He would be the prongs that the jewel is set on. Even now, her worth was diminished because he was lacking, he could not allow it to grow worse.

Climb could not stop his chest from growing warm at the thought of his master. Even a devout believer of his faith would be hard-pressed to outshine Climb as he was now. After staring at himself in the mirror for some time, Climb, having determined with conviction that he would not be a hindrance to his master, nodded his head in satisfaction and stepped out of the room.

Part 3

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 4:35

The place he headed to was a large hall. An entire floor of the tower had been emptied to serve as a training area. Normally the place would be radiating the heat of soldiers going about their

training. However, it was deserted this early in the day. The empty space was quiet; one could almost hear the silence. Because there was stone in every direction, the sound of Climb's footsteps rang out loudly.

The hall was brightly lit from the semi-permanent light of the magic fire. Inside, there was armor mounted on stakes and hay dolls to act as archery targets. The walls were lined with weapon racks filled with various arms that were left unsharpened. Ordinarily, a training area should be set up outdoors. But there was a reason that it was decided to have it inside.

The city of Ro-Lente was home to Valencia castle. Having the soldiers train outside would mean that they would be seen by foreign ambassadors. To avoid the risk of appearing low class, numerous areas within the tower were cleared out to serve as training areas. A demonstration of strong soldiers dauntlessly practicing their drills would have diplomatic benefits, but the Kingdom did not see it as such.

More than anything, there was a trend to be seen as elegant, splendid, and highborn. With that said, there still were drills that were impossible to conduct indoors. They would either be done discretely in a corner or on a field outside the castle, albeit outside the capital.

Climb entered the quiet hall as if he was cutting through the cool air and slowly started to stretch in the corner. Thirty minutes later, after a thorough stretching session, Climb's face was reddened, his forehead was drenched with sweat and his labored breaths were heavy with heat.

Climb wiped the sweat from his forehead and approached the weapon rack. Checking the grip, he makes sure that it fits securely in his hands. His palms were already rough and hard from the numerous blisters that came and went. Next, he filled his pockets with chunks of metal and buttoned them tightly as to prevent them from falling out.

The many pieces of metal that filled his clothes made it as heavy as full plate armor. Regular plate armor without any magical enchants provided an excellent defense at the cost of one's freedom of movement. Keeping actual battles in mind, training with it equipped was the right course of action. But even so, it was rare to bring out full plate armor for mere training, not to mention the white armor that he was given. That was why he was using the metal chunks as an alternative.

Climb gripped the iron weapon that exceeded the size of a greatsword and held it high over his head. He slowly brought down the sword, exhaling as he did so. Stopping just before it struck the floor, he breathed in and raised the sword to its original position over his head.

He stared at the space in front of him with sharp eyes, completely absorbed in his training as he gradually raised the speed of his swings. He had already finished 300 swings. Sweat poured down Climb's completely reddened face. His breaths were hot, as if he was expelling the built up heat in his body.

Although Climb trained arduously as a soldier, it was difficult to handle the weight of the large greatsword. Stopping the blade just before it touched the ground was especially challenging. Such a feat required a great deal of strength. As the count of his swings reached 500, his arms started to cramp and felt as if they were screaming out in pain. Sweat fell from his face like a waterfall. Climb knew very well that this was his limit. Despite this, he showed no signs of stopping. However—

"—Perhaps that is far enough." Hearing the voice of another, Climb quickly turned to the direction of the voice and his eyes reflected the figure of a man. Calling him burly would have been an understatement. The man was like the embodiment of steel. The wrinkles in the face reminiscent of rock made him look older than he actually was. His bulging muscles made it evident that this was no ordinary man. There was no soldier in the Kingdom who did not know of him.

"—Stronoff–sama." Warrior-Captain Gazef Stronoff, lauded as the strongest in the Kingdom and unmatched even in the surrounding nations. "Any further would be overtraining. There is no meaning in pushing yourself so far." Climb lowered his sword and stared at his trembling arms. "You are correct. I overdid it slightly." Seeing Climb's expressionless face as he gave his thanks, Gazef shrugged his shoulders.

"If that is what you truly think, could you not make me repeat myself so often? How many times does this make it…?"

"I apologize." Gazef shrugged once more as Climb lowered his head. This was a conversation that had been repeated countless times between them, like a greeting of sorts. Usually, this was where their exchange would end and each man would pursue their own training. But today was different.

"How about it, Climb. Would you like to try crossing swords?" At Gazef's words, Climb's blank expression almost faltered for an instant. Up until now, they had never crossed swords upon meeting at this location. It was their unwritten rule. There was nothing to be gained even if they were to train together. No, it wouldn't be completely fruitless, but the cons greatly outweighed the pros.

There was currently a power struggle between the King's faction and an alliance between three of the six great noble families. The situation was dangerous enough for there to be rumors that the only reason the Kingdom is not split is because of the yearly war against the Empire. In the midst of that struggle, if the personal confidant of the King, Gazef Stronoff — though highly unlikely — were to lose, it would give the nobility faction a great boon.

On the other hand, the nobles would jump at the obvious outcome of Climb's defeat to whisper that he is unfit to protect Renner. There were many who disliked the idea of the beautiful, unmarried princess trusting a lone soldier with her protection, one with an uncertain background no less.

Both were in a position where they could not lose. They could not appear weak, to show a weak point that could be exploited in an attack. The two were of one mind in that they were both carefully cautious as to not hurt their respective masters. For what reason would he break the unwritten rule?

Climb looked around his surroundings. Because there was no one else here? That was unthinkable. This was an abode of demons. There was no end to those who would watch from afar or observe them while hidden. But he could not think of any other reason. Unable to figure out his intentions, Climb did not allow his puzzling agitation to show on his face.

The man standing in front of Climb was a warrior hailed as the strongest in the Kingdom. Keenly sensing the brief instance of emotion that an ordinary person would miss, he spoke. "Only

recently, something occurred that made me realize that I was lacking. I would like to practice with someone who is competent."

"Stronoff-sama did?"

Gazef, the strongest in the Kingdom, just what sort of incident could make him feel inadequate? Climb suddenly remembered that the number of troops in Gazef's unit had decreased. Climb did not have any close comrades so he had heard it from a rumor circulating around the mess hall. According to the story, they had lost a number of their troops after being embroiled in an incident.

"Yes. If I had not met the merciful magic caster, if he had not lent us his strength, I would not be here right now—" Hearing this, Climb felt his iron mask crumble. No, just who could remain unsurprised? Before he knew it, Climb's curiosity got the better of him and he posed a question.

"Who was that merciful magic caster?"

"…He called himself Ainz Ooal Gown. This is just a hunch, but I feel that he may rival even that monster of a magic caster in the Empire."

He had never heard of that name. Climb looked up to the heroes and had a hobby of collecting stories of their feats. He ignored their races and even collected stories of famous adventurers from the nearby countries. But even so, the name Gazef spoke just now was unfamiliar to him. Of course, there was a possibility that it was an alias. "Th-then— *Cough!*" Climb held back the desire to question him further. *Trying to ask him about an incident that cost him his soldiers… even rudeness has its limits.*

"I will engrave his name in my heart. …But, is it really fine for us to spar?"

"Not a spar, simply crossing swords. What you get out of it solely depends on you. …You yourself are a first rate soldier amongst the country's troops. It should benefit me as well." Although it was a high praise, to Climb, they were merely empty words.

It wasn't that Climb was particularly strong, only that the standard was low. The skills of a soldier of the Kingdom were only slightly better than that of its ordinary citizens. Even compared to the 'Knights', the Empire's enlisted soldiers, they were weak. There was also no one in the nearby countries with military distinction. Gazef's troops were indeed strong, but even so, compared to Climb they fell slightly short. If Climb were to evaluate himself according to the ranks of adventurers, with copper, iron, silver, gold, platinum, mithril, orichalcum, and adamantite, he would be gold. Not weak, but there were many above him.

Could someone like that be considered worthwhile to a man like Gazef? A man, who would, without a doubt, be placed in adamantite rank? Climb shook off such weak thoughts. The strongest man in the Kingdom was offering to train him. This kind of experience would not come often. Even if the end result is that he disappoints Gazef, there would be no regrets.

"Then I ask for your guidance." Gazef grinned and eagerly nodded his head. The two approached the weapon rack and each picked a sword that fit their size. Gazef chose a bastard sword, Climb a small shield and broadsword.

Climb then took out the metal chunks from his pockets. Facing someone stronger than himself with them was a discourtesy. Not only that, he would have to fight with everything he had for the training to benefit his growth. His opponent was the strongest warrior in the Kingdom. A tall, thick wall must be felt with one's full strength.

Now that Climb was finished with his preparations, Gazef asked. "How are your arms? Are they still sore?"

"Yes, I am fine now. They are slightly worn but will not be a problem for my grip." Climb flexed both his hands. Seeing that he was telling the truth, Gazef once again nodded.

"I see. …That is a shame in its own way. One will rarely be in perfect condition on the battlefield. If your grip suffers then you must fight in a way to compensate it. Have you ever trained with those conditions?"

"Hm. No. I have not. Then I will resume my swings and…"

"Ah, no. No need to go that far. But since you are responsible for the safety of the princess, you would do well to learn how to fight in situations where carrying a sword is forbidden. Perhaps also verse yourself in handling various weapons as well."

"Yes!"

"…Sword, shield, spear, axe, dagger, gauntlets, bow, cudgel, and thrown weapons. It's training for the nine types of weapons that serve as the foundation for armed combat, however… If you stretch yourself too thin, then everything will suffer. It would better for you to narrow it down to two or three weapons and learn from there. Hmm. It seems I've said something unnecessary."

"Not at all, Stronoff–sama. Thank you very much!" Gazef wore a bitter smile and answered with a wave of his hand. "If you are ready then let us begin. First, try attacking me in that stance. Soon… yes, I will not be able to spar with you but I can teach you some tactics using the nine weapons."

"Yes! Then I will be in your care."

"Come, but I have no intention of treating this as training. Consider this to be the real thing and attack."

Climb slowly lowered his sword and turned the left side of his body, covered by the shield, towards Gazef's direction. His gaze was sharp and his senses already knew that this was not training. Likewise, Gazef exuded a presence that alerted him that this was a real fight. The two glared at one another, but Climb could not make the first move.

Even if removing the metal chunks made it easier for him to move, Climb did not think he could beat Gazef. In both strength and experience, Gazef was overwhelmingly above him. Simply closing the distance would be immediately met with a counterattack. His opponent was a master who was leagues above him so it could not be helped. But if this were a real fight, could he simply roll over and die because of something like that?

Then what could he do? He had to fight him with a factor that Gazef did not possess. Body, experience, and mind, Climb lost in everything that was necessary for a warrior. The difference was in their equipment.

Gazef wielded a bastard sword. On the other hand, Climb had a broadsword and small shield. If they were magic weapons then it would be different, but these were used for training, there was no disparity in the weapons. Gazef only had one weapon while Climb possessed two, since a shield could be used as a weapon as well. This also meant that he had more ways to attack at the cost of dividing his strength.

Block the first attack with the shield and slash with the sword. Parry with the sword and strike with the shield. Having decided on a counter as his strategy, Climb focused on observing Gazef's movements. After several seconds had passed, Gazef showed a smile.

"Are you not coming? Then I will attack right— now." His calm demeanor absolute, Gazef readied his stance. Hips slightly lowered, strength began to mount in his body like a spring. Climb as well; he gathered strength in his body so that he could block the blade, no matter when it came. Gazef closed in and swung down his sword while aiming for the shield.

—Fast! Climb gave up the notion of moving his shield to deflect the blow. He focused his entire mind and body on defending, just blocking the attack. The next moment — his shield was seized by an enormous impact. The level of force was enough to make him think that the shield had shattered. It was an attack powerful enough to paralyze the hand that held the shield. Withstanding such an impact would require the strength of one's entire body. *Deflect it?! How do you match the timing for something like this?! Just the shock is enough to…* Climb's naïve thoughts left him vulnerable; he felt another impact on his abdomen.

"Gah!" His body flew backwards, his back colliding with the hard stone floor and expelling the air from his lungs. A glance at Gazef made it plain to see what had happened. Just now, he was lowering his leg that delivered a powerful kick to Climb.

"…Even if it's the only weapon in my hand, it is dangerous to focus solely on the sword. Like now, you could be hit with a kick. I aimed for your stomach just now but normally, it would be where the armor is lighter. I may break your knees… even if you were wearing a pad over your crotch, if you're unlucky, armored boots will crush them. Observe your opponent's whole body and watch every movement."

"…Yes." Climb endured the dull pain from his abdomen and slowly stood. The Kingdom's strongest Gazef Stronoff's physical strength was truly formidable. If he had kicked seriously, then it would not have been a problem to break his ribs through the chain shirt and render him unable to fight. The reason that was not the case here was because Gazef held back and merely touched Climb's stomach with his foot and pushed him with the intent to knock him back.

It was an instructional spar after all… Thank you. Realizing that the Kingdom's strongest had sparred with him, Climb was grateful as he resumed his stance. He had to be careful so this precious moment did not end abruptly. Climb once again raised his shield and slowly edged towards Gazef. Gazef wordlessly stared at him as he approached. If this continues, it would only be a repeat of what just happened. Climb had to devise a new plan as he approached.

Gazef waited, exuding an overwhelming calm. There just was no way to make him fight seriously. It would be arrogant to even feel angry. Climb's limit was already visible. Despite waking up early like this to train in swordsmanship, his progress was slower than a snail. Compared to when he first started training, it was too slow.

Going forward, even if he could train his body and raise the speed and weight of his sword, skills like martial arts would be out of his reach. Someone like Climb, to feel angry over the fact that the man who is the embodiment of talent did not fight him seriously would be disrespectful. He, who was unable to draw out the man's full strength, could only blame his own lack of ability.

His words from before that told him to not treat this as training and attack in earnest was a warning. It meant "attack with the intent to kill or you do not even stand a chance." A warning that came from a man who stood in a place that was far above him.

Climb clenched his teeth. He hated his own weakness. If only he was stronger, then he could be of more use. He could become her weapon and fight directly against those who would dirty the Kingdom and harm its people. The fact that her only sword was so weak that she had to be careful of where to point it filled Climb with guilt.

However, he immediately tossed aside such thoughts. What he had to do now was not to lose himself in negativity. It was to throw everything he had at the man who stood in the world of the strong so he himself could grow stronger, no matter how small. Only one thought filled his heart. To be of help to the princess—

Oh? Gazef let out a sigh and slightly changed his expression. It was because the face of the one who stood before him, who was both a boy and a man, had changed. If he were to compare, up until now, he was like a child who met a celebrity and could not contain his excitement. That restlessness had vanished after the kick and was replaced with the face of a warrior.

Gazef raised his level of alertness by a notch. More so then Climb himself realized, Gazef had a high opinion of him. In particular, his single-minded, avaricious pursuit of strength, his loyalty that bordered on religious fervor, and his swordsmanship.

Climb's swordplay was not something he had been taught. He obtained it by sneaking peeks at others who were in the midst of their training. It was unsightly and full of excessive movements. But unlike those who trained mindlessly, each motion of his blade was meticulously thought out and developed for practical use. To put it badly, it became a sword to kill.

Gazef thought it was very splendid. A sword was ultimately a tool for murder. One that was trained casually will not be able to display its effectiveness in a real fight. It will not be able to protect those who must be protected. It will not be able to save those who must be saved. But Climb was different. He will cut down his enemy and protect the one important to him. However—

"—Even if you steeled your resolve, the difference in skill with your opponent is still grave. Now, what will you do?" Assuredly, Climb had no talent. Even if he worked harder than anyone else—no matter how hard he pushes his body, without talent, he will not be able to become strong. He will not be able to reach men like Gazef or Brain Unglaus.

Even if Climb wanted to be stronger than anyone else, it could only happen in dreams and fantasies. Then why was he giving Climb a spar? Would it not be more useful to spend his time on someone with more talent? The answer was simple. Gazef just could not stand by and watch Climb endlessly repeat his useless effort. If talent was the wall decided the limits of humans, he took pity on the boy and his unending, reckless charge against that wall.

That was why he wished to teach him a different method. He believed that although there was a limit on talent, there was no limit on experience. And because of the anger he felt at the pitiful figure of his once greatest rival. *But even so, trying to get satisfaction from elsewhere… I owe Climb an apology…. But facing me should be useful for this guy as well.*

"— Attack me, Climb." At the words he spoke to himself, a powerful shout came back in response. "Yes!" Climb ran as soon as he answered. Gazef, with a serious expression that was different from before, slowly raised his sword over his shoulder. It was a stance for a vertical attack above the waist.

Blocking it with the shield will completely restrict his own movements and parrying it with the sword will blow him back. It was an attack that rendered the act of defending meaningless. Blocking it was foolish. But Climb's broadsword was shorter than his bastard sword.

The only option was to run forward. Knowing this, Gazef was waiting to counterattack. It was the same as jumping into the mouth of the tiger— but his hesitation only lasted an instant. Climb launched himself into the range of Gazef's sword.

As if he was waiting for this moment, Gazef's sword was brought down and crashed into Climb's shield. The tremendous impact was even stronger than before. Climb twisted his face at the pain that was transmitted to his arm. "A pity. The same outcome as before." With a slight hint of disappointment, Gazef's foot reached Climb's abdomen and—

"「Fortress」!" With Climb's shout, Gazef wore a slightly surprised expression. The activation of the martial art, 'Fortress' was not limited only to the sword or shield. It's possible to use it on any part of the body. The reason that one would normally activate it when blocking with their weapons was simply because it was very difficult to find the correct timing for anything else. Using it on armor carried the risk of receiving your opponent's attack without any defenses. Reserving the skill for blocking with the sword or shield was simple common sense.

However, the problem was solved if one could predict their opponent's next move like Climb did with Gazef's kick. "Were you aiming for this?!"

"Yes!" The power behind Gazef's kick disappeared as if it was absorbed by something soft. Unable to channel strength into his extended leg, Gazef gave up on the attempt and tried to bring his foot back down to the ground. Catching him in a disadvantageous position, Climb struck.

"「Slash」!" A martial art, high slash. Just one, have a single skill that you can use with confidence. Taking the words that he heard from a certain warrior to heart, this was the attack that the talentless Climb practiced day in and day out. Climb's body was not wrapped by an armor of muscles. From the start, his constitution was never one for that type of figure. Also, even if he did build up muscle, he could not keep his agility.

Because of this, his body was forged into a specialization through endless repetition. The result was a straight, vertical slash, a high speed attack that bordered on the realm of absurdity. Like a flash of light, a slash that seemed to summon the gale. This attack was coming down on top of Gazef's head.

In Climb's mind, the thought that the blow connecting would result in a fatal injury had vanished completely. It was a technique that was only possible due to the unwavering confidence that the man named Gazef would not die to something of this level.

With the roaring sound of metal, the bastard sword was raised up to meet the broadsword coming down. Everything so far was to be expected. Climb poured all the strength in his body in an attempt to break Gazef's balance. However— Gazef's body did not budge.

Even in the awkward position of standing on one leg, he easily held off the attack that had Climb's full strength behind it. He was like a gigantic tree with thick roots embedded in the earth.

His strongest attack with everything he had, combined with two martial arts, and Climb still could not match Gazef standing on one leg. Despite his surprise, Climb's eyes moved to his own abdomen. The fact that he brought down his broadsword meant that their distance had shortened. It also meant that Gazef could again kick him in the stomach.

The kick landed on Climb's body as soon as he leapt back. There was a small, dull pain. The two stood face to face with a few paces of distance separating them. Gazef slightly relaxed his eyes and eased his lips. Although he smiled, it was not unpleasant, but refreshing. It made Climb feel slightly ashamed. To him, it looked like the smile of a father seeing the growth of his son.

"That was splendid. I will be a bit more serious then." Gazef's expression changed. Climb felt goose bumps all over his body. The strongest in the Kingdom had finally shown himself. "I have a potion with me so there is no need to worry. It can heal fractures."

"…Thank you."

The taciturn way Gazef implied that he should be prepared for broken bones made Climb's heart thump loudly in his chest. He was used to injuries but that did not mean he enjoyed them. Gazef closed in at twice Climb's speed. The bastard sword drew an arc that was low enough to skid the ground and slashed at Climb's legs. Its speed, filled with rotational force, Climb quickly stabbed his broadsword into the ground in an attempt to protect his legs.

The two sides collided, at the least, that is what Climb believed. In that instant— Gazef's sword changed course and rode up the side of the broadsword. "Kuh!" Climb leaned his body back and the sword flew inches past his face. The wind from the slash severed a few strands of his hair as it passed by.

Fearful at the fact that Gazef had cornered him this badly this quickly, Climb saw in his vision that the bastard sword had halted and was quickly coming back. Before he could even think, his survival instinct caused Climb to push forward with the small shield. The bastard sword crashed into the shield and a loud metallic sound rang out. And—

"—Ugh!" Climb felt intense pain as he was blown away to the side. The impact as his body crashed violently to the floor forced his sword from his hand. The bastard sword that had collided with the small shield had moved upwards and delivered a severe blow to Climb's flank.

"It's the flow, not simply attacking and defending. You must move so that every action can flow into your next attack. Your defense must serve as a part of your next assault." Gazef spoke to Climb in a gentle voice while he picked up his sword and attempted to get up while holding his side.

"I controlled my strength so it wouldn't break. You should be able to continue…. What will you do?" Gazef, who did not even seem tired, and Climb, tense and heaving with pain. This ugly sight of not being able last even a few strikes, he was just wasting Gazef's time. Even so, Climb wanted to be stronger, no matter how slight. Raising his sword, he nodded to Gazef and resumed his stance.

"Very well, let us continue."

"Yes!" With a hoarse shout, Climb charged. Beaten, flung about, and sometimes even resorting to punches and kicks, Climb collapsed to the floor with labored breaths. The cold chill of the ground felt pleasant as it absorbed his body heat through the chain shirt.

"Hah, hah, hah…" He did not even try to wipe away the sweat. No, he did not even have the energy to do so. Enduring the stabs of pain, Climb, unable to resist the fatigue rising all throughout his body, closed his eyes slightly. "Good work. I tried not to break or crack anything, but how is it?"

"… …"

Sprawled out on the floor, Climb moved his hands and touched the parts that still gave him pain. "I don't think there are any problems. Painful, but they're only bruises." The ringing pain was light; it would not be a hindrance to the princess' security. "Is that so… Then we will not need the potion."

"Yes. After all, careless use will cancel out the effects of muscle training."

"Indeed. They should be left to heal naturally but magic will end up restoring the muscles to their original state. I assume you will be returning to your duties as the princess' guard?"

"Yes."

"Then take it with you. Use it should anything happen." With a clink, the potion bottle was set next to Climb.

"Thank you." He raised himself and looked at Gazef, at the man his sword could not touch even once. The man without a scratch looked at him strangely, and spoke. "What is it?"

"Nothing… I just thought you are amazing." His breathing was steady, with almost no traces of sweat on his forehead. Climb breathed a sigh; he realized that this was the difference between him, who was on the floor, and the strongest in the Kingdom. On the other hand, Gazef wore a bitter smile.

"…I see."

"How—"

"Even if you ask me how I am so strong, I have no answer to give you. It is simply talent. I learned how to fight during my days as a mercenary. These kicks that the nobles call vulgar, I learned them during those days as well." There is no trick to gaining strength, Gazef declared. The hope that adopting the same training would, to an extent, help him grow stronger was easily dashed. "Climb, you have potential in that sense. Punching and kicking, using your fists to fight."

"Is… that so?"

"Indeed. In fact, it is rather fortunate that you were not trained as a swordsman or a soldier. When one holds a sword, they tend to focus on fighting while only using that weapon. I believe that this is wrong. Change our view of the sword to see it as just another way of attacking while incorporating the fists and legs, would that not be more effective in a real battle? Well… my sword is more suited for adventurers."

Climb's usual blank face was gone and replaced by a smile. He did not expect the strongest in the Kingdom to praise his skills so highly; his unorthodox movements and skills devoid of framework. The sword that the nobles mocked behind his back was being praised. His joy was immense.

"Well then, I will take my leave. I must not be late to the King's morning meal. Will you be heading back?"

"No. There is supposed to be a guest today."

"A guest? A noble, perhaps?" As Gazef thought it strange that the princess would be receiving a guest, Climb responded.

"Yes. Aindra-sama will be visiting."

"Aindra? …Ah! But which Aindra are you referring to? The blue one, right? Not the crimson?" "Yes. Blue Rose." The relief on Gazef's face was obvious at a glance. "Right… That's what it was. If a friend is visiting…"

Gazef must have guessed that the reason Climb was not invited for breakfast was because a friend was coming. In truth, Climb was the one who turned down her offer. Even if he was in a position where such a thing was allowed, to refuse the royal family, even Gazef would furrow his brows at the news. That was why Climb remained silent on the matter and left it to the man's imagination.

Even Aindra herself, who was acquainted with Climb through Renner, requested that he join them. She would not share the adverse reaction of the other nobles even if Climb were to join their meal. This was his consideration for his master who had very few female friends. A princess had almost no opportunity to engage in lady talk and Climb felt that his absence would be for the best.

"Thank you for your guidance today, Gazef-sama."

"Not at all, pay it no mind. I enjoyed myself as well."

"…If it isn't too much trouble, could I ask you to oversee my training next time as well?" Gazef paused briefly— before Climb could apologize, he spoke. "I see no problem with it if we keep it to when others are absent."

Climb didn't open his mouth, he clearly understood the reason for the man's hesitation. He then forced his creaking body to stand in order to show his sincerity. "Thank you very much!" Gazef slowly waved his hand and turned. "I will leave the cleanup to you. It will be troubling if I miss the meal. …Ah, right. That vertical slash wasn't bad, but you should keep your next move in mind. Think of what will happen next if your opponent blocks or avoids your attack."

"Yes!"

Part 4

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 6:22

Having parted ways with Gazef, Climb wiped his sweat with a wet towel and headed for a place that was completely different from the main hall. The room he was currently in was as wide as the hall he was in before. It was filled with many people engaging in conversation. A delicious aroma was mixed in with the warm atmosphere, rousing people's appetites.

It was the mess hall. Climb walked through the bustle of noises and stood behind a line of people. Like the person before him, he grabbed one of the dishes that were piled high. On his tray, he placed a wooden plate, a wooden soup bowl, and a wooden cup. He was served his meal in an orderly fashion.

A large steamed potato, barley bread, white stew with small bits of meat and vegetables, cabbage pickled in vinegar, and a single sausage. From Climb's point of view, it was quite a luxurious meal. As the food made its way onto his tray, Climb smelled a sumptuous aroma and felt it stimulate his stomach. He proceeded to look around the mess hall.

The loud soldiers ate their meals while engaging in superficial conversations like their next day off, today's food, families, and their trivial duties. Climb found an empty seat and made his way there through the bustle of noise. He sat on a space in a wide bench. Soldiers were seated on either side of him, talking merrily amongst their friends. They barely gave Climb a disinterested glance before turning away to resume their talks.

The only silence to be found was near Climb. An outsider looking in would think the atmosphere was strange. Despite the merry chatter in the surroundings, not a single person attempted to strike a conversation with Climb. Of course, people would not normally go out of their way to speak to strangers. But they were fellow soldiers who would, at times, trust one another with their lives. Indeed, such a response was quite bizarre.

It was as if the person named Climb did not even exist. Climb himself made no effort to speak to others, the reason being that he clearly understood his own position. The ones who guarded the castle were not mere soldiers. A 'soldier' of the Kingdom referred to the militia armed by nobles who owned territory. It included the enlisted men whose wages were paid by the governor and those who served as city guard. What they all had in common was that they were made up of common folk.

However, there were many problems with allowing just anyone the job of protecting the palace, the center of important news and information, and placing them so near the royal family. That was why a recommendation from a noble was required in order for someone to become a guard in the palace. If a guard caused trouble, the noble from whom he received his recommendation from would be held responsible. As such, only those with a clean background and a sound body and mind were given a recommendation.

However, this caused factions to form. Depending on which faction the sponsoring noble belonged to, that soldier ended up being roped into that group as well. A soldier who refused would not even receive a recommendation in the first place. It was fair to say that there were no exceptions whatsoever to this rule.

It may seem like it would be filled with flaws, but on the contrary, being embroiled into a power struggle meant that soldiers trained their skills diligently. Although their strength fell short of the Empire's knights, the soldiers who guarded the palace still boasted considerable skill.

Climb's strength was several levels above them, but that was also one of the reasons why the nobles were against him. They could not stand the fact that he was stronger than the soldiers they had recommended themselves.

Of course, there could also be an instance where nobles who sponsored soldiers did not belong to any faction. However, with the current power struggle of the Kingdom between the royalty faction and the nobility faction, there was only a single noble who could come and go between them like a bat.

And among the soldiers, there was only one man who did not enlist on the recommendation of the nobles. That person was Climb. Normally, someone of Climb's background would not be able to serve Renner by her side. Protecting the royal family, a duty of such grave importance did not come to a person of low birth. It was common knowledge that only those of noble rank could protect royalty.

Regardless, there were exceptions to this case, like the Kingdom's elite warriors, as well as its strongest soldier, Gazef Stronoff. And if Princess Renner strongly wished it, there were few who could openly oppose her. Even if members of the royal family could speak against her, just who would interfere when she had the King's approval?

Climb being granted his own private quarters could be called a result of a very complicated circumstance. A simple soldier would not even dream of his own room and would have to spend his daily life in the larger area. Although Renner ordered it, another reason Climb was given his own room was to isolate him. Not belonging to either faction made him a troublesome existence.

Considering Climb's circumstances, it was obvious that he belonged to the royalty faction. But that was a gathering of nobles who pledged their fealty to the King. From their point of view, Climb, with his unclear background, was an eyesore.

As a result, the royalty faction saw Climb as troublesome to recruit, but if left alone will work for their side of his own volition. The nobility faction saw merit in pulling him to their side, but at the same time, recognized its dangers.

Even if they are called a faction, it did not mean that the many nobles who make up the groups are of one mind. No matter what, a faction was a gathering in order to further a goal or way of thinking. If the royalty faction had a person who did not welcome Climb — a commoner of an unknown background who was the closest to a princess so beautiful that she was called golden — then it was safe to say that the nobility faction would have someone who wanted to bring him over to their side.

Regardless, currently there was no one in either group foolish enough to approach Climb and splinter their own faction. The result was that the two factions concluded that they each did not want to hand Climb over to the opposing side, but at the same time, also did not want him on theirs. This was why he did not to speak to anyone and ate alone. Simply moving his spoon without speaking to others, nary a glance, his breakfast did not even take ten minutes to finish.

"I should be going." A habit possibly formed from being alone so often, Climb muttered to himself in satisfaction. As he was rising from his seat, a passing soldier bumped into him. The soldier's elbow touched the wound from Gazef's training, causing Climb, his expression still blank, to stop his feet.

The soldier continued to walk by without a word. Needless to say, the soldiers around him did not say anything as well. The few who saw the incident frowned slightly but did not speak.

With a long sigh, Climb grabbed his empty plate and walked on. This type of incident was an everyday occurrence. He even felt it fortunate that it didn't happen when he had a bowl of hot stew. Sticking out a foot to trip him or bumping into him on purpose and faking it as an accident, such behavior was quite common. However—

— What of it. Climb calmly walked forward. Those people could not do any worse, especially so if he was in a place with as many eyes as the mess hall. Climb straightened his chest, his eyes pointed forward; he absolutely did not look down. If he were to appear unsightly, it would be a slight against his master, Renner. The reputation of the woman whom he pledged his absolute loyalty was on the line.

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Chapter 2: Blue Rose

Part 1

Top Fire Month (Month 9), Day 3, 8:02

White, full plate armor and a sword fastened to his waist. His equipment in perfect condition, Climb stepped into Valencia palace. Valencia palace was divided largely into three main buildings. The one Climb made his way into was the largest and where the royal family resided. Different from where he had been moments ago, the place was designed to let in as much light as possible, making it blindingly bright.

He walked down a wide hallway that was scrubbed so clean that not even a trace of dust could be found, let alone any litter. His full plate armor did not make any noises, the reason being that it was tempered with mithril and orichalcum and enchanted with magic. The palace guards—knights, also wearing full plate armor, were standing at attention in the wide and clean hallway.

The Empire's 'knights' referred to the common folk who were part of the standing army. On the other hand, the knights of the Kingdom were those who were granted a title of nobility. As an example, there were numerous occasions where the third son of a noble household would become a knight, since they were unable to inherit his household. However, since the Kingdom paid the knights handsomely, they only accepted those who were skilled with the sword. It was impossible with only connections even if one were a noble.

The most fitting way to call them would be as the King's elite guards. Coincidently, 'Warrior-Captain' was a newly fashioned title for Gazef since there was much opposition to granting him a knighthood. Climb lightly greeted those same knights. As expected, only a few greeted him in response, but some did respond and even greeted him with sincerity. While they were nobles, these people swore their service to the King and carried a warrior's heart. Their loyalty unforgotten, they carried great respect for those with skill.

On the other hand, among the people Climb passed in the hallway, there were those whose hatred was obvious at a glance. They were the maids. Most of them showed a bitter face whenever they saw Climb. The maids who worked in the palace were different from normal maids in that they were the daughters of noble houses who came to gain experience. In a way, the maids held a higher position than Climb. Especially the ones who worked close to the royal family, most of them were daughters of high-ranking nobility. Their displeasure at the fact that they had to lower their head to a man who was less than a commoner showed itself as anger.

In terms of rank, it was true that Climb was beneath them. They probably wished to show their distaste while Renner was not around. Having thought as much, Climb did not show any anger over their behavior. But what Climb failed to realize was that his thinking spawned a vicious cycle where the maids would misunderstand his expressionless face as him ignoring them, infuriating them further. On the other hand, if he was the type who could notice such a thing then perhaps everything else would have been handled more smoothly.

It was also true for Climb that every time he was in the palace, his nerves would wear away slightly. Although it went without saying, Renner and Ranpossa III were not the only people living in this palace.

Ugh?! Speak of the devil, Climb moved to the side of the hallway, straightened his back and stood at attention with his hand over his chest. Two people were approaching. The one following from behind was a tall, thin man with blond hair brushed behind his head. Marquis Raeven, one of the six great noble families in the Kingdom. The problem was the short, fat man walking in front of him. His name was Zanack Valurean Igana Ryle Vaiself, the second prince and second in line for the throne. Zanack stopped his feet, his chubby face turning into a frown.

"Why, Climb. Are you on your way to show your face to that monster?" There was only one person Prince Zanack would call a monster. Although he knew it was insolent, Climb could not let it stand. "Your highness, I'm grateful for your words but Renner-sama is not a monster. She is kind and beautiful, some even call her the Kingdom's treasure."

What else could you call someone who got rid of the slave trade and proposed many policies in order to help the citizens? Although the number of them that saw light was small because of the checks in place by the nobles, Climb knew better than anyone else how much she cared for the people.

Every time a policy that would otherwise help the common folk was shot down for foolish reasons like nobles trying to save face, the kind-hearted girl would shed tears in front of him. This man, Zanack, who did not even lift a finger, had no right to say anything. He was consumed by the desire to shout, to bring down his fist. Even if they were only half-siblings— these weren't words that should be said about someone who shared the same blood. However, he could not allow his anger to show.

Renner had said this: *"My elder brother will try to anger you so he can hold you in contempt. He's most likely looking for an excuse to separate us. Climb, never let him see you weak."* That sad expression— his master who was not accepted even by her own family, Climb remembered the day when he swore that at least he would never betray her.

"But I wasn't referring specifically to Renner though? That must be what you really think… well, let's stop stating the obvious. But treasure… was it? Is she really proposing her ideas thinking that they would work? It looks to me like she already knows that they won't, but still acts on them."

There was no way that was true. Just how could it? It was the ugly jealousy of a man who could only think in those terms. "I do not think that that is the case."

"Fufufufufu. As expected, it seems you don't see her as a monster. Is it because you are blind? Or perhaps she's being clever? …Shouldn't I be suspicious?"

"Not at all. I firmly believe that Renner-sama is the Kingdom's treasure." Because he was the one who watched her the closest, he was assured that everything she did was righteous.

"Really, that's interesting. Then can you deliver a message to that monster for me? …Although your brother only thinks of you as a political tool, if you cooperate with me, I can rid you of your right of succession and grant you territory."

Climb felt his displeasure rising. "…Jokes should be kept in moderation. I did not expect for you to say such words. I will pretend that I never heard them."

"Fufufufufufu. A pity. Let's go, Marquis Raeven."

The man who was searchingly watching the two in silence nodded his head. Not much was known about Marquis Raeven. Although he had drawn a clear line between Climb and himself, his eyes were slightly different than the other nobles. Renner also did not give any specific instructions on how to treat Raeven.

"Ah, I almost forgot. Marquis Raeven also shares my opinion and thinks of her as a monster. No, you could say that we are in complete agreement on this matter."

"—Your Highness."

"Just one more word, Marquis Raeven. Listen, Climb. If you were a bigot, then I wouldn't have even bothered to say anything. But… I'm giving you a warning since she could be tricking you. She's a monster."

"Your Highness, though it may be presumptuous of me, allow me a question. What part of Renner-sama do you feel that she is a monster? There is no one else who cares more about the Kingdom and its people."

"…Almost all of her efforts end up as nothing. Her actions are too pointless. At the beginning, I thought that maybe it was because her preparations were lacking. Then, the idea came up during a conversation with the Marquis here. What if everything was calculated? That would tie all of the loose ends together. If that were true… it would mean that a girl who lives half her life inside a palace and has almost no connections to the nobles is controlling them as she sees fit. …What do you call that if not a monster?"

"It's a simple misunderstanding. Renner-sama is not that type of person."

Climb was certain. Those tears were not lies. That girl called Renner was selfless and kind. He, whose life was saved by her, knew this for a fact. But his words did not reach the prince. He showed a bitter smile and walked away from Climb, with Marquis Raeven following behind him.

Climb muttered in the empty hallway. "Renner-sama is the most benevolent person in the world. My existence is proof. If…" He swallowed those last words. Even so, they continued in his heart. *If Renner-sama ruled the Kingdom, it would become a great nation that stood by its people.* Of course, considering the line of succession, it was an impossible wish. Regardless, Climb could not give it up.

Part 2

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 8:11

At last, Climb arrived in front of the room in the palace that he frequented the most often. Having checked his surroundings several times over, he boldly turned the doorknob. Not knocking was absurd, but this was what his master wished for. She refused to listen no matter how much Climb opposed it.

In the end, Climb was the one who relented. It couldn't be helped that a girl's tears put him at a disadvantage. Although with that said, he managed to establish a few conditions. No matter what she said, he could not enter without knocking in the presence of the King.

It was also true that entering without knocking was a source of great stress for Climb. Needless to say, every time he opened the door, Climb felt that there was no way that something like this would be permitted. As he was about to fling the door open, his hands stopped at the sound of a heated discussion that was flowing through the small crack. He heard two voices, both female.

The reason he stopped was because one of the voices sounded so absorbed in the discussion that it failed to notice Climb's presence, albeit he was outside of the room. He did not want to throw cold water over their enthusiasm. Climb stood still and focused his ears on the voices in the room. Although he felt guilty about eavesdropping, he would feel even more guilt if he interrupted such a heated talk.

"—say it before? Humans only focus on the profits that are in front of them."

"Mmmm…"

"…Renner, your plan about harvesting different crops on rotation… although I don't really think that would improve the yield… how long would people have to wait for the results to show?"

"By my calculations, at the least, it should take around six years."

"Then what's the projected loss of profits for those six years when we cultivate different crops?"

"It depends on the crop… but if we're at a hundred now then we'll be around eighty percent. So we may have a twenty percent loss. But after six years we'll be looking at a steady thirty percent increase in harvest. If we cultivate pastures and put us on track to raise more livestock, then we can expect even more."

"…If it was just that last part then everyone would jump on it. But will people agree to the constant twenty percent hit for those six years?"

"…The Kingdom loans out the twenty percent without interest or collateral, set up a method of payment when people start to turn a profit. If the harvest doesn't improve… don't collect and if the harvest does increase, according to the plan, people will be able to pay everything back in four years."

"It would be difficult."

"Why?"

"I told you. People only care about profits that are in front of them — there's more who prefer stability. Even if you can guarantee a thirty percent increase after six years, there's obviously going to be people who are hesitant."

"I… don't understand. The results from the field I tested were favorable…"

"Even if the test goes well it still isn't absolute."

"…Well I didn't test it under every possible condition, so I guess it isn't. Accounting for every geological feature of the land or climates would require a large scale experiment."

"Then it's going to be hard. Even not knowing if the future thirty percent increase is the maximum or an average is going to kill your argument. This means you have to be able to promise a significant profit along with profits in the short term."

"What if we provide the twenty percent free of charge for those six years?"

"The rival nobility faction will be happy since the King will be losing power."

"But if we can secure as much goods as we give after six years, the national power will see an increase…"

"Then the rival nobility's power will increase as well while the King's power falls by twenty percent. The nobles in the King's faction will never agree to it."

"Then we ask the merchants and…"

"You're talking about the Great Merchants right? They have their own conflicts. Carelessly lending their strength to the King's faction can affect their ability to conduct business properly with the other faction."

"This is too hard… Lakyus."

"…You can't get much advance work done so your policies end up with a ton of weak spots. Well… I can understand that two massive factions make it incredibly difficult. …How about working just on the issues in the palace?"

"I don't think my brothers will allow it."

"Ah, those idi… people who left their honor in their mother's womb just for you."

"We don't even share the same mother."

"My, so from the King's side then. Anyways, to think that even the royal family isn't close, so frustrating…"

As the room became quiet, she realized that the discussion was finished.

"Ah, it's okay to come in now. Right, Renner?"

"What?"

That voice made Climb's heart thump loudly in his chest. He was astonished that she already knew he was here and at the same time, felt that it was to be expected. Climb slowly opened the door.

"—Excuse me." A familiar sight entered Climb's eyes. Luxurious but not gaudy— in the room, two blond ladies sat around a table by the windowsill. One of them was obviously the master of

the room, Renner. And the girl opposite to her, with green pupils and pink lips that showed a healthy gleam. Her beauty fell short of Renner but overflowed with a different charm. If Renner was the brilliance of a jewel, then she was the brilliance of life.

Lakyus Alvein Dale Aindra. Although you would not think it from her light pink dress, she was the leader of one of only two adamantite rank adventurer teams in the Kingdom, as well as Renner's closest friend. At nineteen years old, what allowed her to achieve the countless achievements necessary to rise to such a difficult position was her overflowing talent. Climb felt the tiniest traces of envy ooze out of his heart.

"I hope you are well, Renner-sama, Aindra-sama."

"Hello, Climb."

"Hello."

As Climb finished his greeting and was about to move to his designated spot — to Renner's right, just behind her — he was interrupted. "Climb, not there, over here." The place Renner was pointing at was the chair to her right. Climb thought it odd. There were five chairs placed around the circular table, the same as always. But there were three teacups laid out in total.

One in front of Renner, Lakyus, and next to Lakyus— a seat different from where Renner was pointing. He looked around but could not find the third person anywhere. Even as he thought it was strange, he turned his eyes to the chair. The discourtesy of sharing a table with his master, royalty at that, the order to enter the room without knocking — or in Renner's words, a request — almost all of Renner's orders placed a burden on his conscience. "But…" Climb turned his eyes to the other girl, seeking help. His wordless plea to the other companion to please spare him was immediately shot down. "I don't mind."

"Th-that's… Aindra-sama…"

"Like I've told you already, call me Lakyus." Lakyus slightly peered over at Renner and continued. "Climb is special after all."

"…Angry." Renner smiled as she spoke. The sweet tone of Lakyus' words seemed to end in a heart mark. Rather, it was difficult to call her expression a smile, where only her lips moved while her eyes were serious. "Aindra-sama, you should stop with the jokes."

"Alright, alright. Climb really is stubborn. How about trying to learn from her?"

"Huh? A joke?" Seeing Renner surprised, Lakyus stopped abruptly and heaved a large sigh. "Isn't it obvious? It's true that Climb is special, but only because he's 'yours'." Renner blushed slightly and covered both her cheeks with her hands. Climb awkwardly looked away from her and his eyes immediately opened wide.

"What?!" Shocked, Climb lowered his body, grabbed the sword fastened to his waist and moved to protect Renner. Lakyus let out another sigh. "Climb got surprised because you're like that." Her calm voice did not contain any caution or sense of crisis. Having understood what it meant, Climb felt the tension leave his shoulders.

"Understood, boss." The girl sitting in the shadows hopped up in a single breath. "Ah, Climb, you don't know her. This is our team member—"

"—Tina-san." Renner finished Lakyus' sentence. As far as Climb knew, the adamantite ranked adventurer team 'Blue Rose' was composed of five women: the leader, faith based magic caster Lakyus, warrior Gagaran, magic caster Evileye, and Tia and Tina who were trained in thief skills.

Climb already met Lakyus, Gagaran, and Evileye but was unacquainted with the last two. *This person is… I see. She really is like the rumors say.* With slender limbs and appearance covered by the clothes that wrapped tightly around her body, she really did look like someone who would train in thief skills. "…I apologize for my rudeness. Nice to meet you, my name is Climb." Climb bowed his head low to Tina.

"Hmm? Don't worry about it." She answered Climb's apology with a wave of her hand and, completely silent, like a wild animal, approached the table with smooth movements. She sat in the chair that was next to Lakyus, so the teacup from before must have been hers.

Even while the number of teacups on the table meant that it was impossible, Climb looked around the room once more, carefully checking for the other girl who he wasn't acquainted with. Lakyus saw what Climb was doing and opened her mouth, as if she immediately understood him. "Tia didn't come. Gagaran and Evileye both said that they hate formal stuff. This isn't even that formal though. I dressed up just in case, but it's not like I pushed the others to dress up too."

Despite what Lakyus said, her type of attire was the correct etiquette when appearing before the princess, but Climb had no intention of telling this to a person who was both Renner's friend and a distinguished noble. "It seems that's the case. But I'm grateful to meet the famous Tina-sama. I look forward to your guidance."

"Why don't you continue your talk after you sit, Climb?" Renner drew out a new cup and poured tea as she spoke. The tea from the magic item 'Warm Bottle' gave off steam like it was just freshly brewed. It was one of Renner's prized possessions that had the effect of maintaining the temperature and quality of the beverage inside for one hour. She used it quite liberally when receiving a particularly important guest and rarely brought it out otherwise.

With no way to refuse, Climb resigned himself and sat in his seat, drinking a sip of the tea. "It's delicious, Renner-sama." Renner smiled sweetly, but honestly speaking, Climb had no clue as to whether or not it was good; only that something brewed by Renner could only be delicious.

That was when, suddenly, he heard a flat, emotionless voice. "—Tia should be collecting information today. The three of us was supposed to visit the palace today, but our evil boss suddenly ordered a job. Everything is the evil boss' fault." Needless to say, it was Tina's voice. Climb averted his eyes away from Lakyus' frightening smile and asked: "I see… Should there be an opportunity, next time, I would like to meet her at least once."

"Climb, Tina-san and Tia-san are twins; even the length of their hair is similar."

"So if you just see one then there's no problem." Although whether or not there would be a problem wasn't the issue, Climb showed that he understood. Nevertheless, Climb felt

embarrassed by Tina's merciless gaze. As he was about to ignore it, the thought that she could have spotted something that he lacked prompted him to ready himself and asked: "What is it?"

"Too big."

"…What?"

He didn't know what she was talking about. As countless question marks floated above Climb's head, Lakyus apologetically intervened. "It's nothing. She's just talking to herself. Don't worry about it, Climb. No, really, don't worry about it. I'm serious."

"Yes…"

"…What is she talking about, Lakyus?" Although Climb was forcing himself to agree, a confused Renner interfered. Lakyus watched Renner with a sour expression. "Really, you, whenever it's about Climb…"

"Ah, I meant—"

"—Shut up, Tina. The reason I didn't bring Tia was because she was going to say something strange to Renner. Can you understand that and stop talking?"

"Got it~ evil boss."

"…Lakyus, what was she going to tell me?" Lakyus' face turned stiff at Renner's interrogation. She even looked like she was suffering. As Climb thought about whether to intervene, Lakyus quickly turned her eyes. "Huh… Climb, you're using that armor."

"Yes, it's an incredible armor. Thank you." Although it was a forced change of topic, as to not embarrass the guest, Climb responded and moved his hand to the white full plate armor that he received from Renner. Forged with a great amount of mithril — with a bit of orichalcum — the armor had various magical enchants on it that made it surprisingly light, tough, and easy to move in.

The mithril for forging the splendid armor was provided by the members of Blue Rose. No matter how much he gave his thanks, it wouldn't be enough. As Climb was about to bow his head, Lakyus stopped him. "You don't have to worry about it. We just gave you the leftovers from when we made our own mithril armor."

Even if it were just leftovers, mithril was a very expensive material. One would be able to afford a mithril full plate armor once they reach orichalcum rank. A mithril rank might be able to afford a mithril weapon. Only a person in the adamantite rank would be able to just give it away.

"I just can't say no to Renner, after all."

"You didn't accept payment back then. I saved up my allowance…"

"…Isn't it odd for a princess to call it an allowance?"

“Funds from the demesne are counted separately. I wanted to make Climb’s armor with my own money.”

“Of course you did~. It’s Climb’s so I’m sure you wanted to pay for it~.”

“…If you knew then you didn’t have to give it to him for free. Stupid Lakyus.”

“Stupid? Why you…” The sulking Renner and grinning Lakyus, the two bantered playfully. Seeing such a scene, Climb concentrated so that his expressionless face would not crumble. Even the fact that he was able to witness such a kind, gentle scene was all thanks to the master who accepted him under her wing. However, he could not allow his feelings to show.

Although a feeling of gratitude was fine, he could not show what lay beyond it, his strong feelings for Renner. His love. He grabbed his feelings and suppressed it. Instead, he said the words that he had repeated countless time before. “Thank you. Renner-sama.” His message was clear. There was a firm line drawn between them — the position of master and servant — ever so slightly, Climb saw it— because he had watched over her for so long, the smallest trace of sadness in Renner’s smile.

“Not at all. Anyhow, we’ve digressed. Shall we return to the main topic?”

“It’s about the Eight Fingers. I stopped at the part where we broke into three of their villages for growing drugs and set fire to the fields, right?”

Hearing that name, Climb’s expressionless face frowned slightly. ‘Eight Fingers’, a criminal organization that operated in the dark side of the Kingdom. His esteemed master was acting in order to do something about that group. As for the fields that were burned, one could only imagine the worst case scenario for the villages that depended on growing the drug for a living. However, the lives of those villagers were a necessary sacrifice in order to eradicate the drug that was eating away at the Kingdom.

If she possessed absolute authority, then any measure could be taken. But even as the princess, she had no backing. The only option was to make the cold-hearted decision of saving whoever she could save and to cut away the rest.

Supposing she petitioned her father, the King, then it may be possible for her to attack with military or political might. But as long as it was certain that Eight Fingers had ties to the nobility, there was no doubt that the information would be leaked and the evidence erased in advance. That was why Renner chose to personally request Lakyus and her party. Climb knew well that this was a dangerous move. Normally, an adventurer accepted requests through the guild and did not acknowledge personal requests. To do so was a violation of the rules.

Of course, the guild could not impose punishment or expel the highest ranked adamantite rank adventurers. Nevertheless, their reputation within the guild would suffer and there would be negative consequences in the future. The reason that her request was accepted despite all of this was because Blue Rose loved the Kingdom and considered Renner their friend.

Climb felt his gratitude toward Lakyus rise, the one who accepted the job even at her own risk. Lakyus decided that it was about time to bring up a certain topic. She opened the bag Tina had

brought and pulled out a single parchment. It was a writing that the Blue Rose members, including Lakyus, could not decipher. But if it was Renner, the best brains out of everyone that Lakyus knew, then perhaps something could be done about it.

"We found this when we were burning the village's drugs. It seemed to be some kind of written orders so we brought it back… do you know what it is?" The open parchment contained symbols that were not part of any country's written language. Renner glanced at it and replied immediately. "…It's a substitution cipher." A substitution cipher was a type of code where a word or several words together was switched for a different word or symbol. If '1' indicated 'a' and '2' was 'b', then '11221' became 'aabba'.

"That's what I think too. We looked hard for a substitution chart but couldn't find one unfortunately. There's a chance that it was memorized so we captured someone who looked to be in charge. Our option here should be to ask the captive with charm magic, but as you already know, charm magic loses its effectiveness when repeatedly cast by the same person on the same target. The first time has to count. I didn't want to go ahead with it without consulting you first."

"I see… the reason this message was left behind… a trap… or is it for a different reason? Then they wouldn't have made it too difficult. Yes, I think I can crack this code pretty easily."

Lakyus' eyes went wide at Renner's words. In spite of herself, her eyes met with Tina who sat next to her. She couldn't believe it. But on the other hand, she felt that it was to be expected. "Let's see. The first letter of the Kingdom's alphabet is either the male article or female article; it should be one of the syllables so… wait one moment." Renner muttered as she stood with the parchment in hand and returned with a pen and paper. She began to write.

"This code switches out one letter per symbol so it's easy. And thank goodness that it uses the Kingdom's alphabet. If it used the Empire's or if we needed to translate it first, then it would've been almost impossible. This is… first, if you figure out just one letter then you can just fill out the rest. Anybody could do it if they tried."

"No no, you just make it sound easy. Wouldn't it be impossible without knowing tens of thousands of words?"

"But this is an order written in code. The instructions wouldn't be hidden behind a metaphor and the chance of them using difficult words is very small. The messages are probably written clearly so that even children can understand it. That's why their scale is so large."

Lakyus inwardly broke out in cold sweats. Although her friend called it simple, that was absolutely not the case. *If it's her then it's possible… really, her ability is ridiculous.* Every time they met, every time they spoke, she was surprised. Lakyus didn't know anyone who better fit the term 'genius.'

In contrast to Lakyus who was trembling on the inside, Renner lightly held out the paper in her hand. "I'm finished. It wasn't orders though." Various locations outside the Kingdom were listed on the paper. Seven were within the Kingdom's lands. "Could these be where they store the drugs? Important bases maybe?"

"Such important information wouldn't be written down and just left in a production facility. Isn't this bait?"

"A bait? You mean it's a trap?"

"Mmm… No, I don't think so. Even though Eight Fingers is one organization, isn't it more like the eight groups that make it up are cooperating with one another?"

Lakyus nodded her head. "Then this is probably about the other seven groups. The organization that's in charge of drugs leaked this information on purpose so they could spin it into an advantage."

"So they prepared information on all the organizations besides their own… I knew that they weren't close, but to think that it was this bad…" As an adventurer, the thought of betraying one's allies filled her with aversion. "As I thought, it'll be bad if we don't move quickly." To her friend who was nodding her head, Lakyus repeated her question.

"Then what should we do about the brothel? It's a very vile place so supposedly you can experience anything there." Even when she said so herself, Lakyus felt her insides boil in anger. *Damn it. Trash that only thinks about their lust can all die!*

Remembering the information she received about the brothel, separate from the daughter of a noble, her adventurer side that endured all kinds of hardships raged inside of her. There was no need to ponder what 'anything' implied. No doubt that countless people — regardless of gender — were murdered there for entertainment.

In the past when the slave trade still existed, brothels like that had been plentiful in the underworld, but thanks to the active role of her friend in front of her, the slave trade was outlawed and those days were long gone. This was probably the last such brothel remaining in the capital, perhaps in the Kingdom.

That was why removing it wasn't so simple. No doubt that they would be met with strong opposition. It was the last depraved paradise for those with fetishes so vulgar, they could never tell other people about them.

"Say, Renner. Since we can't rely on the government to investigate, how about we break in there by force and raze it? There's no problem as long as we find evidence, no? If the slave trade is running the brothel, destroying it will be huge. And depending on the evidence we find, we could deal a big blow to the nobles who are involved."

"You might be right, Lakyus. But if we do that, it'll hurt your family's, the Alvein's name. That's why it's difficult. It'll be the same if we used the Blue Rose members… though with that said, it's impossible for Climb to take care of it by himself."

"I apologize for my lack of ability." As he bowed his head, Renner stretched out her hand and grabbed Climb's hand with a gentle smile. "I'm sorry, Climb. That's not what I meant. It's the last underworld brothel in the Kingdom. It's impossible for anyone to do it alone. Listen Climb, whom I trust the most. I know how hard you work for me, but don't do anything reckless. This is an order and not a request, understand? If anything were to happen to you…"

Watching from the side, even to Lakyus, who was the same gender, there was something in the eyes of the beauty welling with tears that moved the heart. Then what about Climb? Although he desperately tried to keep his face still, the bright red cheeks said everything that needed to be said. If a bard were to give it a title, it would be The Princess and the Knight. In the face of such an emotional scene, Lakyus felt a tiny sliver of terror. Although it was impossible, if Renner's actions were all calculated, just how much of a master schemer was—

Just what am I thinking about my good friend? It's obvious she doesn't have such a bad personality by looking at everything she's done so far. She's worked to help others. If I can't believe in someone who's earned the nickname of Golden, just who can I trust? As if she was trying to rid herself of these terrible thoughts, Lakyus shook her head and spoke. "Now that I remember, Tina and her friends managed to uncover the names of a number of nobles involved with Cocco Doll — the leader of the slave trade. But we don't know whether or not the information is accurate so acting on it would be jumping to conclusions."

As Lakyus went through the names one by one, both Renner and Climb reacted to one name in particular. "That noble's daughter is working as my maid."

"What? I doubt that he planted her as a spy to watch you but… I guess there's no guarantee that she's just working as a maid for the experience either."

"Right. I should be more careful with how I handle information. You keep it in mind as well, Climb."

"Then shall we discuss how to deal with the locations from the cipher? And Renner, do you think I could borrow Climb? I want him to tell Gagaran and the others to be ready to move immediately."

Part 3

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 9:49

Climb walked down the Kingdom's main street. With nothing noticeable about his outer appearance, Climb completely blended into the crowd. Needless to say, he was not wearing his eye-catching full plate armor. Using a special alchemy item would allow him to change the color of the armor, but he didn't feel the need to go so far just to have it on with him.

That was why his gear was light; a chain mail beneath his clothes and a longsword at his waist to set him apart from the average citizen. His current equipment was similar to those of patrolmen and mercenaries, the kind one could find anywhere. It was somewhat enough for others to keep a respectable distance, but not so heavily armed that the crowd would part before him.

A person who was heavily armed would no doubt be an adventurer. They armed themselves to be noticeable rather than out of necessity. Adventurers who wore gear that made them stand out were not uncommon. It served as a form of advertisement for their services. There were those among them who went for an especially novel appearance so that they would leave a strong impression and spread rumors to sell their name. It was the trademark of an adventurer.

But the people that Climb was on his way to meet had no need for such antics. The members of Blue Rose spread rumors simply by walking down the street. Eventually, an inn for adventurers

could be seen by the side of the main street. The place had lodgings, a stable, and a yard large enough to swing a sword in. Behind its splendid outward appearance was an equally beautiful, decorated interior. The rooms were even fitted with windows made of clear glass.

As the highest class inn in the Kingdom, it was a place where adventurers who were confident in their skill and could afford the expensive lodging costs gathered. Climb ignored the guard standing at the side and opened the door to the inn. The first floor doubled as a pub and a restaurant. Compared to the large parlor, there were only a few adventurers. High class adventurers were as rare to see as they were skilled.

The faint chatter in the room died down for an instant and eyes filled with curiosity focused on him. Climb ignored them and looked around. There were only strong adventurers everywhere he looked. Every one of them could easily beat Climb in a fight. Whenever he came to such a place, he clearly realized just how small he really was. Climb stopped himself from being disheartened and moved his eyes on a certain spot in the inn.

In the farthest corner of the room, his eyes rested on the two figures sitting around a circular table. One of them had a small stature and was wrapped in a jet-black robe. The face was hidden not because of the lighting, instead it was entirely covered by a strange mask with a red jewel embedded in its forehead. The area around the eyes had a thin crack so that it was impossible to even tell the color of the pupils. And the other figure…

Although the person before had a small body, the other possessed an overwhelmingly huge physique. Enough to make one think of a huge rock. In a way, the body could be described as plump, but not because it was fat. First, the arms were as thick as tree trunks. In order to support the head, the neck was as thick as an average woman's thighs, and the head resting on top of that neck was a square. The chin was wide as to better clench the teeth for power, the eyes for scanning the surroundings looked like the eyes belonging to a carnivore. The blond hair was cut short strictly for functionality.

The chest hidden behind her clothes was conspicuously bloated by muscles trained over and over. It was no longer the chest of a woman. The female-only adamantite rank adventurer team— Blue Rose. They were two of its members, magic caster Evileye and warrior Gagaran. Climb headed in their direction. The person whom he needed to speak to nodded her head and shouted in a husky voice. "Yo, cherry boy!"

Once more, the stares focused on Climb, but there were no sounds of jeering. As if they had suddenly lost their interest, they turned away instead, with something akin to sympathy filling their eyes. There was a reason for the cold treatment from the other adventurers. They knew that even for orichalcum or mithril rank adventurers, showing discourtesy to Gagaran's guest wasn't courage, only reckless bravado.

Even while he was being made fun of, Climb calmly walked forward. Since Gagaran wouldn't change her nickname for him no matter how often he asked, the most effective method was to pretend that he gave up and no longer cared. "It has been a long time, Gagaran-sam—san, Evileye-sama." He approached the two and bowed his head.

"Yeah, long time no see. What, did you come here because you wanted to be embraced by me?" While motioning with her chin to take a seat, Gagaran asked him with a beast-like grin across her

face. But Climb shook his head with a blank expression. This was also part of Gagaran's usual banter. Although it was a greeting, it did not mean that she was joking. If Climb ever replied in the affirmative, even in jest, Gagaran would immediately drag him to a room on the 2nd floor with overwhelming strength, without any chance for retaliation.

Gagaran, who would openly proclaim that plucking a 'fresh cherry' was her hobby, was that type of person. Different from Gagaran, Evileye stared directly in front of her and showed no sign of turning her face. You could not even tell which direction the eyes beneath the mask were pointing.

"No. I'm here because of a request from Aindra-sama."

"Huh? From the leader?"

"Yes. I will deliver her message. "It seems we'll have to move soon. I will explain the details when I return. Be ready for battle immediately"."

"I got it. Hmm, you're sure going through a lot of trouble for something so trivial."

Climb remembered that he had something else to say to Gagaran who wore a wide grin. "I had the fortune of being instructed in the sword by Stronoff-sama today. He praised the high vertical strike that you taught me in the past." He had learned that move from her in this inn's backyard. Gagaran smiled brightly.

"Oh, that! Not bad at all. But…"

"Yes. I will not be satisfied and train harder."

"That's good and all, but assume that move will be blocked and start working on a skill to come after it."

Whether it was a coincidence or just common sense to first rate warriors, Gagaran's advice was very similar to Gazef's. Apparently misunderstanding Climb's surprised face, Gagaran continued to speak with a chuckle. "Obviously, that vertical slash is meant to be a one-hit-kill. Normally, the correct way to go about it is to choose from a wide repertoire of moves depending on the situation. But the thing is, that's impossible for you." She was implying that it was because he had no talent.

"So work on a combination that consists of at least three attacks. Make it so that even if they're blocked, your opponent can't switch to the offensive."

Climb nodded.

"Well, if you're against monsters that have eight arms and such, it may not work. But it should be fine against humans. Even though having a pattern will be the end of you if it gets found out, it's still pretty effective against opponents that you meet for the first time. Think of something that will let you push forward over and over and over."

"I understand." Climb earnestly nodded his head. This morning, only once could he push forward into Gazef like that. Everything else was blocked and countered. But did that shake his confidence? No. Did he fall into despair? No. The opposite. It was the opposite.

An ordinary person was able to get that close to the strongest warrior in the Kingdom, no, the surrounding countries. He also knew very well that his opponent had not been fighting seriously. But to Climb, who was walking a pitch black road completely devoid of light, it was more than enough of an encouragement.

It told him that that his efforts were not in vain. When he remembered that, what Gagaran was trying to say touched his heart. Even though he wasn't confident about whether or not he could successfully come up with a combination of attacks, the burning urge to do it still rose up from the bottom of his stomach. The next time he fought the Warrior-Captain, he wanted to be strong enough to make him a bit more serious.

"…Now that I remember, didn't you ask Evileye for something awhile back? Was it magic training?"

"Yes." Climb glanced over at Evileye. Back then, it was turned down by a scoff from inside the mask. No doubt that bringing up the same topic when nothing has changed will have the same result. However—

"Kid." He heard a voice that was difficult to read. Even disregarding the fact that it was through a mask, it held a very mysterious tone. Even with a mask, as long as the sound was not too thick, it should be possible to somewhat make out the timber of the voice. However, you could make out neither the age nor emotion behind Evileye's voice. It was barely enough to just recognize the voice as female. It sounded like both an old woman and a young girl, flat and emotionless. It was because Evileye's mask was a magic item, but why did she go that far in order to hide her voice?

"You don't have the talent. Try something else." A crude remark, as if that was all that she needed to say. Climb himself knew at least that much better than anyone. He did not have any talent for magic. No, not only magic.

No matter how much he swung his sword, no matter how much he bled and hard his hands became from the blisters, he could not reach the level that he wanted. The wall that those with talent would easily overcome, even that became an absolute obstacle that he could not traverse.

Even so, that was not a reason for him to be lazy with his efforts to cross over that wall. As long as he was talentless, the only thing he could do was believe that his efforts will allow him to take at least one step forward.

"It seems you can't accept it." As if she read Climb's emotions beneath his expressionless iron mask, Evileye continued to speak. "Those who possess talent have it from the very beginning… Some claim that talent is simply a bud that has yet to bloom and that everyone has it… Hmph. I see it as nothing more than envy. Words like that are so the inferior can console themselves. The leader of those famous thirteen heroes was the same."

The leader of the thirteen heroes; there was a legend that in the beginning, the hero was just an ordinary person. Although that person was weaker than anyone, the hero became the strongest by endlessly swinging a sword despite being covered in wounds. The hero possessed a power that could rise without end.

"But that person's talent had simply not bloomed at that time. You're different, even with effort you're still only at that level. Talent undoubtedly exists. There are those who have it and those who do not. So… I won't tell you to give up but at least know where you stand." Evileye's cold words brought a curtain of silence.

And it was she herself who broke that silence. "Gazef Stronoff… now that one is a good example of a human with talent. Climb… do you believe that you can fill the difference between the two of you with hard work?" His words wouldn't come out. It was only this morning that he experienced the distance between them which couldn't be overcome with training.

"Actually, he might not be a fair comparison. The only ones I know of who can rival his talent with the sword are the thirteen heroes. Gagaran here is fairly skilled but still can't beat him."

"…Don't ask for the impossible. Gazef-ojisan is someone with one foot in the realm of heroes." Gagaran replied to Evileye's words with a laugh. "Hey, hey, Evileye. Weren't the heroes considered to be monsters with talent that was in a different league— the type transcending the realm of humans?"

"…I won't deny it."

"And I'm only human. It's impossible for me to reach the level of those heroes."

"…But you still possess talent. You're different from a human like Climb. Climb, don't try to reach for the stars."

Climb knew that very well. But it was true that being told that he had no talent so repeatedly would make him feel disappointed. Even so, he had no intention of changing his ways.

—It was because his body was for the princess—

Sensing something akin to martyrdom from Climb, Evileye clicked her tongue behind her mask. "…I guess you won't stop even if I say it like this."

"No."

"You are foolish, truly foolish." She shook her head, unable to understand him. "Moving forward with an unreachable wish will definitely ruin your body. I'm repeating myself, but know where you stand."

"I understand what you are trying to say."

"But I see you have no intention of listening. You are beyond foolish. It will lead to an early grave. …Won't there be someone who will cry if you were to die?"

"Huh? What's this, Evileye? Were you bullying Climb because you were worried about him?" Evileye's shoulders slumped at these words. She grabbed Gagaran by the collar with her gloved hand and shouted as she stared at her. "The meathead needs to shut her mouth!"

"But I'm right though, aren't I?" Evileye could not say a word to Gagaran who remained calm even when she had her by the collar. She leaned deeply into her chair and, trying to change the

topic, turned her arrow to Climb. “First, master your knowledge of magic. If your knowledge improves then you may be able to predict the moves of your enemies who use magic. Then you will be able to respond appropriately.”

“Hey, you know how many different spells there are and you’re telling him to study all of that? Aren’t you being too cruel?”

“That’s not true. There is a common pool of spells that a magic caster typically focuses on. He can start by studying those.” Evileye implied that if he couldn’t even manage that, he should give up. “No matter how many there are, he’ll probably be able to manage if he can study the spells up to the 3rd tier.”

“…Hey Evileye, you said magic goes up to the 10th tier and that no one’s managed to master them. But there’s information on those? Why is that?”

“Hmm…” With the air of a teacher instructing a student, Evileye moved around in her robe. As she did so, suddenly, the noise from their surroundings fell distant. It was like a thin curtain had been draped over them and the table. “Don’t be alarmed. I merely activated a trivial item.” Just how cautious was she of others listening in? Realizing that Evileye’s answer to Gagaran’s question was important enough to warrant using an item, Climb fixed his posture in anticipation.

“In an old legend— one of the stories passed down, there exist a group called the Eight Kings of Greed. Some call them beings who stole the power of God and ruled this world using their absolute strength.”

Climb knew the story. As a fairytale, it was quite unpopular, but anyone who was somewhat educated knew about it. To sum it up, the Eight Kings of Greed appeared 500 years ago. Taller than the sky, the likeness of a dragon, the Eight Kings of Greed destroyed numerous countries and ruled the world with their overwhelming strength. But in the end, their greed pitted them against one another and resulted in their demise.

Although the story was obviously unpopular, there were differing opinions on whether it was fact or fiction. Climb himself felt that the story was overly exaggerated. However, there were many among the adventurers who felt that they did, in fact, once exist; with power greater than any that currently exist in present time. The basis for their belief was the existence of the desert city far to the south. It is said that the city was built to be the capital back when the Eight Kings of Greed ruled the continent.

While Climb was deep in his own thoughts, Evileye continued to speak. “It is said that the Eight Kings of Greed had a countless number of powerful items. And the greatest among them was an item called the ‘Nameless Spellbook’… A grimoire by that name exists. There is your answer.”

“What? So you’re saying that the spells are in that book?”

“Right. That magic item holds power beyond comprehension. They say that all magic is recorded in that grimoire. I have no idea what kind of magic it uses, there is a rumor that even newly created magic gets automatically recorded.”

He knew about the legend of the Eight Kings of Greed but it was the first time that Climb had heard about such a book. He vaguely understood just how rare such an item was and remained silent while listening carefully.

"With it as the foundation, we were able to discover the existence of 10th tier spells. Of course, there are only a few who know of this story and the 'Nameless Spellbook'."

Climb gulped loudly. "Y-you do not have any plans to obtain that 'Nameless Spellbook'?" It was a question he wondered because they were the highest class adventurers. But Evileye snorted back a laugh, as if he had said something idiotic.

"Hmph. According to the person who's actually seen it, the strong magic guarding the grimoire prevents anyone without a strong sense of justice from touching it. An item that's worth a country will carry with it dangers to match. I know what I can and can't do, and I would rather not die a fool's death like the Eight Kings of Greed."

"It's impossible even for the party whose leader possesses a weapon of the thirteen heroes?"

"…In a different league, that one. Well, this is something I heard offhand as well so I can't be certain. The talk has gone off topic. Anyhow, there's your answer, Gagaran. Do you understand?" And for some reason, Evileye showed a brief moment of hesitation before opening her mouth. "Climb. Even if you desire power, don't give up your humanity."

"Give up on my humanity…? Are you speaking of the likes of demons that appear in stories?"

"That and others like turning into an undead or magic life forms."

"A normal human cannot do something like that."

"That's true… but turning into an undead will often twist your heart as well. Desiring perfection, becoming an undead to achieve one's ideal… the heart will be tempted by the changing flesh and the resulting transformation will be terrifying." A tinge of pity could be felt from the voice behind the emotionless mask. Evileye looked as if she was staring far off into the distance. Gagaran watched her and spoke out cheerfully.

"Won't the princess be surprised if she wakes up one day and Climb became an ogre?" As if she understood what was hidden behind Gagaran's comment, Evileye reverted back to her unreadable voice. "…Well, that's also another method. Transformation magic can be made so that its effects are only temporary. To put it simply, it's one way of raising your physical strength."

"I would like to pass on that."

"In regards to becoming stronger, it's quite effective. The physical capabilities of the human body are not very impressive. With the same talent, a stronger body would be more advantageous." That was obvious. If the skills were the same, the side with more power would have the upper hand.

"In reality, there were many among the thirteen heroes who were not human. Even if they are called the thirteen heroes, they numbered far more. It just so happens that only thirteen had legends attached to them. …The battle against the Demon God was one that transcended the racial

barrier. Those who wanted to put the focus on humans would be rather hesitant to perpetuate a legend where those of other races played an active role."

Evileye spoke with a cynical edge to her voice. The atmosphere then immediately shifted and she continued on, her tone heavy with nostalgia. "The wielder of the cyclone axe was the Warrior-Captain of the Air Giants. If any members of the elf royal family who possessed traits of the old elves were there… it would be Dark Knight, the original owner of Kilineiram— our leader's demonic sword. The Knight shared the blood of demons, a mixed blood."

"The Four Swords of Darkness…" It is said that one of the thirteen heroes, the Dark Knight, wielded four swords: evil sword Hyumilis, demon sword Kilineiram, necrotic sword Colocudabar, and death sword Sufiz. The leader of Blue Rose, Lakyus, possessed one of them. "Demon sword Kilineiram… the strongest Sword of Darkness that is said to be created from condensing endless dark energy. Hey, Evileye. Is it true that if you unleash its full power, it can shoot out enough darkness to swallow a country whole?"

"What are you talking about?" Evileye seemed perplexed. "Our leader said so awhile back when we were alone. She was grabbing her right hand pretty hard and said something about how only a woman of faith like her can suppress its power."

"I've never heard of anything like that…" Evileye tilted her head, thinking it odd. "If the owner says so then it could be true."

"Then the thing about dark Lakyus who was born from her dark consciousness must be true too?"

"What?"

"When was it, she was muttering that to herself while she was alone. I don't think she knew that I was there so I eavesdropped a bit. 'I, the source of the darkness will take over your body once you let your guard down and release the demon sword's power.' Or something like that, it sounded pretty dangerous."

"That's… not impossible I guess. Some cursed items do take over their owners. …If that happens to Lakyus then it won't be a laughing matter."

"She told me to keep it a secret, but that's a little… you know? I asked her about it personally but her face got really red and told me to not worry about it."

"Hmm. She must have been embarrassed that a cleric like her was controlled by a cursed item. They're the ones who lift those curses, after all. Maybe she didn't want to worry us? That girl, she's been worrying about it alone."

"I haven't seen her do that since then but… just think about it, ever since she got that sword, didn't she start wearing those pointless armor rings on all five of her fingers?"

"I thought it was fashion, are you saying that those are sealing magic items or possibly a catalyst?"

Climb could not maintain his poker face and frowned. The current conversation drove him to think that Lakyus was possibly being slowly dominated by an evil item. Thinking of where she was just recently only served to increase his restlessness. "…Renner-sama might be in danger."

Evileye stopped Climb who was about to run off. “Don’t worry. It’s not as if something is going to happen immediately. Even if she were to fall under that dark power, there is no way that it could happen before the person herself noticed it. If she didn’t want us to know then she most likely judged that she can keep it in check. I don’t doubt her willpower, but… to think that sword had such an ability… I had no idea.”

“Should we send word to Azuth-san just in case?”

“It’s a bit frustrating to seek help from a rival… but since it’s a problem about his niece then I guess it would be for the best.”

“Ok, then should we get moving? I need to find out where he is.”

“Yes. We have to be prepared to support Lakyus at any time.”

“Only adamantite can stop adamantite, after all.”

“—Hmm?! Ah! I just remembered, Gagaran. A third adamantite rank adventurer team is supposed to be residing in E-Rantel.”

“What, really? That’s new to me… Did you hear it at the adventurer’s guild this morning?”

“No, that’s… Oh, right. I apologize. I forgot to tell you. From what I hear, their color is black.”

“Black? We have red and blue so I thought the next one would be brown or green.”

“Black is a color used in the faith of the Six Gods so there is nothing strange about it. The next team might be white.”

“I’m not really a fan of the Slane Theocracy though. Because of that one incident, we fought those guys who looked like they were from some secret unit.”

Despite Climb feeling that he had heard something incredibly dangerous, the conversation ignored him and continued on.

“You do not like them, Gagaran? …Although this may seem ironic, I can sympathize with their policy. Well, it’s more like I feel that the role of the guardian of the human race that they impose on themselves is just, at least from a human’s perspective.”

“What? So it’s okay for them to kill innocent elves and demi-humans?” The disgust was apparent on Gagaran’s face. Her eyes burned with an intense hatred. Evileye answered her animosity with a mere shrug.

“Around here, there are several human countries like the Kingdom, the Holy Kingdom, and the Empire. Gagaran, did you know? The farther you venture out, there are less and less countries that are made up of humans. Depending on the location, there are countries where humans are used as slaves. One of the biggest reasons none of them are near us is due to the Slane Theocracy hunting down the demi-humans.”

With her anger cooled by Evileye's words, Gagaran sullenly muttered to herself. "Well, demi-humans are stronger than humans after all. Humans won't be able to do anything if they unite and advance their civilization."

"If you are human, you must evaluate those from the Theocracy highly. Of course, they may have a cruel side, but there are none who are more beneficial to humanity. …Well, it would be a different story if you were to ask the same of the minorities that are being purged. Not only that, there's a very good chance they were the ones who formed the original adventurer guild."

"Really?"

"Maybe. The truth is unknown but there is still a high possibility. The adventurer guild was formed after the battle against the Demon God and in those days, humans were weak. They preserved their strength and, as to not cause friction between them and the kingdom, formed the guild so they could provide support."

When she finished talking, a peculiar silence covered the table. Climb could not endure the atmosphere and opened his mouth. "Forgive me for interrupting, Evileye-sama. You said that new adamantite rank adventurers had appeared. What are their names?"

"Hmm? Ah, right. It was— Momon. The leader is a warrior who's called the hero in black and apparently the name of the team hasn't been decided yet. It seems they're just called Black."

"Heh~ and the other members?"

"I hear it's a two-man team with the other member being called Beauty Nabe, a magic caster."

"What? Just two? What're you saying? They must be idiots overconfident in their skill… No, that's why they're adamantite. They must be hiding something amazing. So? What kind of feats did they achieve?"

"Apparently it only took them around two months. First they took care of the incident in E-Rantel regarding the thousands of undead that spawned. Then they exterminated the coalition of goblin tribes from the north, gathered an incredibly rare herb from the Tob Mountains, subjugated a Gigant Basilisk, and exterminated a group of undead that spilled over from the Kattse Plains. I also heard that they defeated a powerful vampire."

"Gigant Basilisk…" Climb groaned. With characteristics of both a lizard and a snake, the Gigant Basilisk was a giant monster measuring ten meters. It possessed a petrifying gaze with deadly poison coursing through its veins. What was worse was that its thick skin was as hard as mithril. It was truly a terrifying existence. If they were really able to defeat a monster that could destroy a small town, then it would not have been strange for them to rise to adamantite. However, there was a problem. That was—

"That's… incredible. But did they really beat a Gigant Basilisk with only two people? Isn't that impossible with just a warrior and a magic caster? Not a chance."

Indeed. With only two people, it was close to impossible, especially if it was only a warrior and a magic caster. They did not have anyone to heal them. Not only would there have been no way for

them to defend against its petrifying gaze and poison, but also the variety of other attacks at the monster's disposal.

"Ah! I apologize; I don't think you can classify them as only two. From what I heard, they tamed the Virtuous King of the Forest by force."

"…Virtuous King? What kind of monster is that?" Climb remembered hearing that name in one of legends. However, interrupting here would have been the height of discourtesy.

"I'm not exactly sure either. According to the legend that's been passed down, it is a demon that has been living in the Tob Mountains. It's supposed to be strong beyond comparison. In the past, an acquaintance… right, apparently it hadn't been there 200 years ago when that person visited the mountains." Evileye shrugged as she said the number 200. Although it was an age possible for an elf, by her behavior, it may have just been a joke.

"Heh~. So, how much of that is actually true? Rumors usually come with a bit of an oomph, don't they?" That's how it was. While telling the story to others, the person doesn't even notice that they are exaggerating the facts. Bodies that have been chopped to pieces makes it difficult to get an exact head count. At times, the adventurers themselves spread rumors to promote their name.

But Evileye raised one finger and waved it side-to-side in a dismissive gesture. "At least this incident is most likely true. According to the first rumor that came from E-Rantel, he exterminated an undead giant with his sword and broke through thousands of undead. This is from the reports of the sentries who managed to survive. Their reports were all nearly identical so they shouldn't be exaggerated. Apparently it was confirmed that they defeated the two responsible for the incident from their corpses farther in. What's more, it was after they defeated two Skeletal Dragons."

Seeing Gagaran's mouth hanging open, Climb asked. "Is that difficult even for you, Gagaran-san?"

"If there were thousands of zombies or skeletons, then they wouldn't be a problem. It's possible to break through them. Probably could have done something about the two Skeletal Dragons too. But I'm not too sure about the two masterminds behind such a huge incident. I'm not confident I could win when I don't even know their abilities."

"There were even some remarks that they may have been from Zuranon."

"Really, Evileye? Man~ if they were the Disciples of Zuranon then it would've been over right there. Beating them after breaking through the swarm would be hard. And if you make even a small mistake and get poisoned or paralyzed, then it's over. What did those guys do for healing? Did they rely on potions? This Momon warrior guy could be using faith magic like our leader. Or maybe it's the Beauty?"

"I can't deny the possibility." Evileye nodded her head with an umu umu motion. "But still, a Gigant Basilisk… that's still impossible. For a warrior… that's the worst enemy for someone who fights in close range. Even if I can use Gaze Bane, it's still hard without backup."

"Did you hear, Climb? It's impossible for Gagaran alone. In other words, it depends on the skills of that woman Nabe. If they fight together then it would be possible… maybe?"

"Ah~ it would be easy if that Nabe person was as strong as you, Evileye. Wouldn't it be simple for you to solo it if you just fight from afar?"

"That's asking too much. I would have to fight seriously."

"If you were there in the same two incidents with me, then the best I could take on would be… the Skeletal Dragon. But then I would be relying on you too much, Evileye. If I paired up with an orichalcum rank magic caster and it was just us two… then that'd be impossible."

Climb had a strange thought. Just how strong of a magic caster was Evileye? A normal team would be made up of members with similar strength and experience. Was there that big of a difference between them?

"That is not true. I know how strong you are, Gagaran-san. You would not fall behind a group of newcomers."

"Wow~ thanks for the praise. Okay, wanna do it?"

"No, I will have to decline."

"And that's why you're still a virgin. Didn't you hear that it's disgraceful for a man to refuse a meal that's been laid out in front of him? Why are you still carrying it around like it's something good? What're you going to do when you actually do it with a girl that you like? Do you want to be told that you're clumsy? Is that what you're into? Are you an M?"

Digging into Climb without even giving him a chance to respond, Gagaran let out a big sigh. "Well, it's not like I'm pressuring you. I'm okay with it whenever so just tell me if you want it. …But Beauty, huh. That's a pretty embarrassing nickname. Isn't the name just for show?"

"She's supposed to be quite beautiful. According to my information, she—" Climb thought that Evileye's gaze stopped on him for a brief instant, then soon understood that he was right. "—rivals the Golden Princess." Gagaran looked at Climb playfully. He predicted what she was going to say next and made the first move. "What is beautiful and what is ugly is different for everyone. And to me, there is no one who is more beautiful than Renner-sama."

"Yes~ Yes~." A voice of obvious disappointment.

"Hmm, we've went off topic quite a bit. I'm sorry for having you take part in needless chatter. We will start with our preparations like Lakyus instructed." Gagaran and Evileye stood from their seats. Climb also followed suit. "Sorry, Climb. There's a lot I want us to do together, but I don't think now's the time."

"Not at all, Gagaran-san. Please don't worry about it. And Evileye-sama as well, thank you for your advice." Gagaran silently stared at Climb then let out a tired laugh.

"Fine, you're going back right? Look after the leader, will you? Bye bye, virgin. …And make sure you keep your items secure. That weapon at your waist isn't what you normally use, no?"

"Right. This is in case for emergencies."

"You don't know what's going to happen so even if you don't wear your armor, at least always carry your sword with you. That's what it means to be an adventurer, especially a warrior. Also, do you have the item that I gave you?"

"The bell? I have it right here." Climb tapped the pouch tied to his belt.

"I see. Then it's fine. Remember, as warriors, the only thing we can do is swing our weapons. But that's dangerous. Magic items are what lets us prepare for those dangers. Get a lot of items and hold onto them. And keep at least three bottles of potions with you. It's what saved me in the past."

He had three potions but only brought two with him. Climb responded that he understood.

"…You're surprisingly considerate of others."

"You making fun of me, Evileye? …Sorry for keeping you, Climb. Basically, what I want to say is to always be prepared beforehand."

"I understand."

Gagaran nodded deeply.

Part 4

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 6, 6:15

Nine men and women sat around the circular table. Despite the leaders who commanded each section of the Eight Fingers gathering in one place, none of them made the effort to meet each other's eyes. They simply looked over the documents in front of them or talked with their own subordinates.

It was like a gathering of completely separate organizations. Although the situation wasn't so bad as to call it explosive, the guarded caution they had for one another was apparent, like one between enemies. However, from each of their respective points of view, this was the obvious response. Even if they were one group and working together, in reality, they would often steal assets from one another and rarely joined forces.

For instance, the drug trade manages and operates everything from a drug's production to the moment it hits the market. Something the smuggling group had no part to play in. The groups did not openly interfere with one another, but it was common to see them attempt sabotage while the other had their backs turned.

Such actions held absolutely zero merit for an organization as a whole. This was one of the pitfalls of multiple criminal groups banding together to form a larger one. These people attended the routine division meeting of the Eight Fingers despite having such terrible relations as they had a good reason to do so.

The reason was: any who did not attend was considered to be a possible traitor and targeted for purging. That was why even those who had no business in the Kingdom went out of their way to attend the meeting. Even those who normally secluded themselves in safety stepped out onto the spotlight. Needless to say, their fear of being assassinated meant that they brought bodyguards

with them. These were two of their most skilled men that they were allowed to bring to the meeting, selected carefully from their own group. — All except for one person.

"Everyone is present. Let's begin our regular meeting." The chairs creaked loudly as the man's voice caused everyone to sit up straight. The one who opened his mouth was the speaker for this meeting and also the leader of the Eight Fingers. Adorned with the mark of the Water God, the man who looked to be in his fifties wore a gentle expression on his face, the type who did not seem to belong in the underworld. "There are a number of topics for discussion, but the first that needs to be sorted— Hilma."

"Yes~?" The one who responded was a woman in white. Her skin was sickly pale and her clothes were white as well. A tattoo of a snake crawled down her right arm, starting from her shoulder blades and reaching to her hand holding a pipe that gave off poisonous, purple fumes. Wearing purple mascara and lipstick, the thin garments that hung loosely around her body gave her the decadent aura of a high class prostitute. She yawned deliberately. "Can't you start a bit earlier?"

"…I heard that your drug cultivation facility was attacked."

"Yep, it's true, a village that was used as a production plant. Cost me a pretty penny too. I might cut down on distribution."

"Were you able to find information on the ones responsible?"

"Nope, it was perfect …Well, it's not like I don't have any leads."

"Their color?" Everyone knew what he meant by that question.

"Don't know. It's just starting to become clear; I haven't gotten that far yet."

"I see. As you've all just heard, this is the current situation. Raise your hand if any of you have any information." There was no response. It was unclear whether they didn't know, or simply had no desire to answer. "Then next is—"

"—Hey." The man's voice rang low, holding an incredible amount of power. All of the eyes in the room gathered in one spot. In that place was a bald man with half of his face covered in tattoos of beasts. Everything about him was large; the outlines of his muscular figure obvious even through his clothes. The cold glint of his eyes belonged to that of a warrior.

Although the other group leaders had brought bodyguards with them, the man had no one standing behind him. It would be meaningless to bring along people who would be of no use. That much was obvious. The man glared at Hilma, the leader of the drug trade. No, he probably did not intend to glare at her, but his knife-like eyes made it appear that way.

For a moment, the bodyguards behind the woman drew in their breaths. They could feel the overwhelming difference in power between them. They knew that the man was a monster capable of killing everyone in the room. "How about employing our services? It'll be hard for you to protect your assets with those small fries of yours." Zero. He was the representative of the security division that accepted a wide range of jobs, from bouncers to bodyguards for nobility. What made him even more famous was that he was the strongest member of the Eight Fingers. But the offer from a man of his caliber—

“No.” — was rejected. “It’s fine. I can’t reveal my key positions.” That was the end of it. As if he had lost interest, Zero closed his eyes, making it seem as if he had turned into a boulder. “Then I’d like to take you up on that offer.” A skinny man opened his mouth. His soft demeanor contrasted harshly against Zero. “Zero, I want to hire your guys.”

“What’s this, Cocco Doll. Can you afford it?” While Hilma’s drug trade was on the rise, Cocco Doll’s slave trade was on the decline. With the slave market outlawed by the efforts of the Golden Princess, he and his group were forced to hide deeper underground. “Don’t worry about it, Zero. And while we’re at it, I want you to lend me the best of the best, someone from the Six Arms.”

“Oh?” Zero reopened his eyes, his interest piqued for the first time. He wasn’t the only one who was surprised. Almost everyone present shared his sentiment. The name ‘Six Arms’ originated from the sibling god of the God of Theft, one who was said to possess six arms. They were the six strongest members of the security division.

Needless to say, the most powerful among them was Zero, but the remaining five did not fall very far behind. One with the ability to cut space, one who controls illusions, and among them was even an Elder Lich, a powerful undead.

If Gazef Stronoff or adamantite rank adventurers were the strongest on the surface, then the Six Arms were the strongest of the underground. Employing someone of such caliber could only mean one thing. “You must be in quite a bind. Alright, just sit tight and wait. My strongest subordinates will ensure the safety of your goods.”

“Sorry~. I ran into a bit of trouble with a girl that was supposed to be disposed of. This much preparation is probably a bit excessive but if that store goes under then it puts me in a sticky spot. Let’s save the talk about the payment for later, okay?”

“Fine.”

“Since the discussion is over, can you start immediately? There’s actually something that I need handled as soon as possible.”

“Alright. I’ll lend you the guy who I brought with me.”

“…Then we can move on to the next topic. Those who know about the new adamantite rank adventurer ‘Momon’ of team Black, any thoughts?”

Interlude

Clang clang. One could hear the sound of precious metals banging against one another. Having confirmed that there was no longer anything in the upside-down sack, Ainz spread the glinting coins on top of the table. He counted the gold and silver coins in stacks of ten pieces each. Despite having already counted it numerous times, Ainz picked up the sack and peered inside. Needless to say, it was empty— after checking it a second time, Ainz tossed aside the sack and grabbed his head.

"Not enough… This is nowhere near enough…" His human face that was created with an illusion became undone. Of course, the mountain of coins in front of him was a small fortune. It was an amount that an average person from this world would not be able to earn even after several decades. But from the perspective of the Supreme Ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, the only one who could earn foreign currency, it was severely lacking and a great cause for concern.

Ainz' mind was forcibly calmed whenever an emotion he experienced exceeded a certain threshold. For example, if he was hit by the panic of only having a single silver coin left remaining, his mind would immediately regain its composure. Currently however, that response failed to activate because at the back of his mind, he knew that there were still some gold coins in the coffers. This left him with a feeling of anxiety that burned through his body.

Ainz shook his head and proceeded to divide the gold coins in front of him based on how they would be spent. "First, this is the additional funding for Sebas." Ainz' face stiffened as he saw how the pile was reduced in an instant. "Next is… costs for the restoration of the Lizardmen village that Cocytus requested as well as the necessary tools…" Although it wasn't as large as the one before, another significant chunk of the pile also became separated and only a few gold coins remained.

"…About the supplies for the Lizardmen village, I can use my connections with the guild as an adamantite adventurer. It'll cover a bit of the costs so… about this much?" He took back a few gold coins from Cocytus' pile. "…Maybe I should find a merchant and get a sponsorship. It would be a way to earn a regular income aside from adventuring."

Including Ainz, there were only three parties of adamantite rank adventurers in the Kingdom. For this reason, there were instances where they would receive commissions from merchants. Ainz dearly wanted to accept those kinds of jobs because for him, they were easy and paid extremely well. However, he had hesitated to do so up until now.

He feared that it would paint his Momon persona as greedy, that the people and other adventurers would see him as someone who would accept any job for money. Ainz was planning to elevate 'Momon' to an adventurer who was praised by all and when the time came, credit all of his fame to Ainz Ooal Gown. In order for this plan to succeed, it was necessary that he pay close attention to how the masses saw him.

"But still… I have no money. Maybe I shouldn't have stayed in an inn like this." Ainz looked around the magnificent room. This was the most splendid room of the best inn in E-Rantel. The

money to rent such a place was exorbitant. Since it was useless to Ainz who had no need for sleep, he wanted to use the funds for the rent elsewhere.

It was the same for meals. Even if he were served luxurious food, all of it was useless to him since he could not eat. It would be smarter to refuse them and save on food expenses. However, Ainz knew very well that he could do no such thing. Ainz was, no, Momon was the sole adamantite rank adventurer of this city. Such a person could not make a cheap inn his residence.

The necessities of life were one of the easier ways of comparing oneself to others. An adamantite rank adventurer must dress and live befitting of his status. He had to show such vanity for the sake of maintaining appearances. That was why Ainz could not lower the quality of his inn even if he knew that it was a needless expense.

"If the adventurer guild thinks I'm so valuable then they could at least pay for my room… Haa… I guess they would do it if I were to ask." But he did not want to owe any favors. Until now, he took on urgent job requests and worked so that people would be indebted to him. He wanted to save it for later to use as a bit of intimidation. Spending it on such a trivial matter would interfere with his plans.

"Ah~ I'm broke. What should I do? Should I accept some requests, after all…? But there aren't any that pay well these days. And if I take on too much then the other adventurers will resent me…" He had to make Ainz Ooal Gown a lasting legend, a good one rather than bad, if possible. Ainz imitated a sigh and counted his spending money in his head from the coins that remained.

"Speaking of money, what should I do about the Guardians' salaries?" Ainz pondered as he leaned back in his chair and looked to the ceiling. The Guardians insisted that they did not need something like wages, claiming how they could possibly desire compensation on top of serving the Supreme Being which is their greatest joy.

But from Ainz' perspective, he questioned whether it was alright for him to simply accept their good will. Work must be met with fair compensation. Even if the Guardians insisted that pledging their loyalty to the Supreme Being was in itself the reward, it was difficult for Ainz to be convinced. It may just be his self-righteousness, having experienced working in a company for pay. However, he could not abandon the notion that work had to be rewarded. He did fear the possibility that a salary might corrupt his children who did not know any better. Even so, there was merit in introducing it as an experiment.

"The question is what I'm going to reward them with." His eyes moved from the ceiling back to the few remaining gold coins on the table. "If I consider the Guardians as department heads of a listed company, then they would need at least 15 million yen annually… Shalltear, Cocytus, Aura, Mare, Demiurge… Albedo would need a bit more, right? So multiply by six and… Hmm, yep that's impossible. I can't raise that much money."

Ainz pulled at his head and suddenly opened his eyes wide. "That's it! I can substitute it with something else! Currency that can only be used in Nazarick— make something like notes for children and have one equal a hundred thousand yen!"

Having shouted as much, Ainz frowned once more. But what could they spend that currency on? All of the facilities in Nazarick were free. Even if he thought of minting coin, he could not think of

what to spend it on. “Maybe use it to buy items from this world?” Ainz compared the common goods of this world with those of Nazarick and doubted whether any of the Guardians would actually want them.

“But if I start charging for the stuff that was free up until now, that would be counterproductive… what should I do…” After thinking it over for a while, Ainz came up with a great idea. “Right! I’ll just ask the Guardians to think about it. I can ask them if they have anything that they want badly enough to pay money for!”

As Ainz muttered happily to himself about his nice idea, his smile suddenly turned bitter. “With that said…” He realized that he was talking to himself more and more often. He knew that it started back when the game was nearing its end, the loneliness from his guildmates no longer showing up. But why was it that his muttering did not die down even after the NPCs gained sentience and moved about on their own? Perhaps it became a habit, or—

“Because I’m still alone…” Ainz gave a lonely smile. Of course, saying that he was alone even with the self-aware NPCs by his side was rude to them. But he also had this thought; in order to act as Ainz Ooal Gown, the leader of the 41 Supreme Beings that the Guardians wanted, it was possible that he was killing Suzuki Satoru.

Ainz heaved a sigh and turned his gaze back on to the coins on the table. That was when he heard a knock on his door. After a brief respite, the door opened. Confirming that the person who entered was the one he was expecting— Narberal Gamma, Ainz deliberately fixed his expression so that one corner of his lips curled upwards, into a face that looked as if he were looking down on someone.

The low rank illusion that Ainz was able to cast plainly showed his emotions on the surface. As such, there was a chance that he would show a face ill-fitting of Nazarick’s ruler. That was why he practiced countless different expressions in front of the mirror so that whenever he was in the presence of others, especially Narberal, he could seem more dignified. He had a great deal of trouble choosing an expression out of the many he practiced. “What is it, Nabe.” He questioned her with an equally decorated voice.

“Yes, Momon-sa… san.”

“…It seems the ‘sama’ appears occasionally. No choice but to leave it as an old habit. Regardless, at least you fix it when I give a warning, albeit temporarily. I guess I must give up on that endeavor. Ah, there is no need for you to bow your head, I am not angry. And the respectable way you address me… well, it should be fine since it seems other people including the guild leader have come to some misunderstanding about us. So, what is it?”

“Yes, the iron ore that you demanded of the merchant has arrived.”

It wasn’t a demand I just bought it normally… Thinking so in his head, his dignified expression remained unmoving. “I see… where was the iron ore from? Was it gathered from all eight locations?”

“I apologize. I was not told.”

"…It's fine. I have plenty of money. Although I do not know how many places it was gathered from, there should be more than enough money to purchase all of it." Ainz confidently filled the sack with the coins that were stacked on top of the table and tossed it at Narberal's feet. He watched as she courteously picked up the bag.

"Understood, but may I ask you a question?"

"Is it regarding the reason why I am buying iron ore from different locations?" Ainz explained it to Narberal who nodded her head. "It is so that I may toss them into the Exchange Box. In other words, I wish to test whether or not the amount of gold differs based on where the ore was mined."

The Exchange Box was not influenced by the appearance of the original object. For example, regarding a detailed stone statue, it would ignore any workmanship and calculate its worth to be equal to a stone of the same weight. Then the test was to see how it handles the difference in components— in the actual material. That was the reason why he was buying iron ore from various locations.

"As you already know, Nabe, it works even if you were to put in something like barley." Although I inserted in bulk and only got one gold coin from it— Ainz added on in his head. That was what spawned the plan to build barley fields outside of Nazarick, to grow them in bulk. Using golems and undead would allow them to create a vast field. Of course, there were countless obstacles before reaching that point.

"I understand. Then I will proceed to buy them as soon as possible."

"Right, but maintain your vigilance. There is no guarantee that you will not be attacked. If something happens… you understand what to do, correct?"

"Use Shadow Demon as a shield, abandon the notion of gathering information, prioritize my safety above all else and focus entirely on retreating. I will then move to the fake Nazarick built by Aura-sama, delivering false information to the enemy."

"Correct. Prioritize your safety. Never take the roads that are easily assaulted or where there are no crowds. And even if humans talk to you or provoke you, do not cause them severe harm. I was quite shocked when that man begged me for help while crying, saying how he was only trying to hit on you. You must also control your bloodlust. I will not go so far as to tell you not to beat a pickpocket should you happen to run into one, but don't take it too far. Also, refrain from calling humans insects. In other words, try not to injure or kill humans. We are the greatest adventurers, Momon and Nabe of Black, after all."

While watching Narberal who seemed to show that she understood, Ainz thought over any other precautions that he may have missed then nodded his head. "…Hmm. This should be enough. Then go, Nabe." Narberal bowed her head and left the room, the leather sack in tow. Ainz watched her back as she left and, despite not having lungs, sighed heavily.

"…The expenses only pop up when I don't have any money. Damn it all."

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Chapter 3: Those Who Pick Up, Those Who Are Picked Up

Part 1

Month of Equinox Fire (Month 8), Day 26, 15:27

After escorting the old woman to her house, Sebas headed towards his original destination. The place he arrived at was surrounded by wide walls. Beyond it, he could see three towers, each five stories tall. None of the buildings in the immediate area reached as high as the towers, making them seem incredibly tall. The towers were surrounded by several narrow, two-story buildings.

This was the headquarters of the Kingdom's Magician's Guild. They needed that wide berth of land in order to create new magic and nurture magic casters. The reason they possessed so much land despite receiving almost zero funding from the Kingdom was because they were the ones in charge of creating magic items.

Eventually, he spotted a sturdy looking door. The decorated wooden door leading to the two story building was left wide open, flanked on either side by numerous armed guards standing watch. Without being stopped by the guards — receiving only a cursory glance — Sebas stepped through the doorway.

Beyond it was a set of wide, level stairs that led to another door connecting to a splendid, aged building made of white marble. That door as well was left open as if to welcome all guests. Passing through that door led to a small entrance hall, and beyond it was the lobby. The tall ceiling of the hall was adorned with countless chandeliers that were lit with magic.

To the right was the lobby's lounge, complete with numerous sofas where several magic casters seemed to be in the middle of a discussion. To the left stood a notice board, numerous adventurers and people wearing the robes of magic casters could be seen staring earnestly at the parchments nailed on the board. Further inside, several young men and women sat behind a counter. All of them had the same emblem as the one hanging in front of the building embroidered onto their robes.

On either side of the counter stood a skinny, life sized puppet without eyes or a nose— a wood golem, reminiscent of a sketch. It was most likely used as security. Save for the guards outside, the reason that the guards inside the building were not human was probably so that the Magic Guild could appear unique.

Without missing a beat, Sebas steadily approached the counter. The young man at the counter acknowledged Sebas and greeted him with his eyes. Sebas slightly nodded in response. The two were already familiar with each other because of his frequent visits. The young man smiled and gave his usual greeting to the man in front of him.

"Thank you for visiting our Magician Guild, Sebas-sama. May I ask for the purpose of your visit?"

“I would like to purchase a magic scroll. May I see the list, per usual?”

“Yes, of course.”

The young man quickly placed a large book on the counter. He most likely already had it prepared when he saw Sebas walk in. Made with rich, thin, white paper and a leather cover, it was a splendid book. Considering that the words were embroidered in gold thread, it alone would make it quite expensive.

Sebas pulled the book towards him and opened it. Unfortunately, he could not read its contents. No, it would be more accurate to say that those from Yggdrasil could not read them. Although he could understand their speech because of the strange rules of this world, written words were a different story.

However, his master had given him a magic item for this exact problem. Sebas drew out a spectacle case and opened it. Inside was a pair of glasses with a thin, silver-like frame. Looking closely, they were engraved with narrow letters — patterns. The lenses were crafted from blue ice crystals.

As he put them on, the magic within them allowed him to read the words. He quickly flipped through the pages with meticulous precision and suddenly stopped his hand. His eyes moved from the book and rested on a young woman who was sitting behind the counter, next to the young man. He spoke to her in a gentle voice. “Is there a problem?”

“N-nothing at all…” The girl blushed and lowered her face.

“I just thought… that your posture was quite striking.”

“Thank you very much.”

Sebas showed a gentle smile, causing the girl to blush even deeper. The gray-haired gentleman Sebas was someone who you would be attracted to simply by looking at him. On top of his graceful countenance, he radiated an elegance that turned the heads of nine out of ten women, regardless of age. It could not be helped that the young woman at the counter would mindlessly stare at Sebas; it was quite common, after all.

Sebas nodded and returned his gaze to the book, his hand stopping on a certain page as he asked the young man a question. “This magic— ‘Floating Board’, could you tell me about it in detail?”

“Of course.” The young man began his explanation without hesitation. “‘Floating Board’ is a 1st tier magic that creates a floating, translucent board. The size and weight limit of the board varies depending on the caster, but when invoked from a scroll, it measures one meter on all sides and can hold up to 50 kilograms. The board can be at most five meters away from the caster. Please note that it can only follow, the board will not recognize any other movement commands like leading the front and so on. If the caster quickly turns 180 degrees in place, the board will slowly reposition itself behind the caster. This spell is usually used to transport goods and in construction sites.”

Sebas nodded his head. “I see. Then I would like one scroll with this magic.”

“Understood.” The young man was not surprised by the fact that he chose a rather unpopular magic. Most of the scrolls that Sebas would buy were the unpopular kind, such as this one. The Magician Guild could only be grateful to him for helping them get rid of their surplus stock.

“Will one scroll be all?”

“Yes, if you would, please.”

The young man gestured at the man sitting beside him. Having listened to the whole conversation, the man immediately stood up and entered through the door behind the counter. Scrolls were an expensive commodity. Even with guards, it should not be stored at the counter. Around five minutes later, the man returned. In his hand was a single rolled up parchment. “Here it is.”

Sebas stared at the parchment that was set on the counter. The craftwork of the rolled up parchment was impressive, even at a glance, it was different from the ones found in the market. He checked to make sure that the name of the magic written in black ink matched the name of the magic that he wanted then removed his glasses.

“I’ve confirmed it. I will be taking this.”

“Thank you very much.” The young man politely bowed his head.

“This scroll is a 1st tier spell and will cost one gold and ten silver coins.” A potion created from the same tier of spells cost two gold coins. Compared to that, it was relatively cheap. A scroll was special in that normally; they could only be used by those who are versed in the same branch of magic. It basically meant that a potion that could be used by anyone would obviously fetch a higher price.

Of course, even if you were to call it cheap, one gold and ten silver coins was still quite a large sum for the average person. It was about a month and a half worth of wages. However, for Sebas— no, for the one he served, the amount was trivial. Sebas took out a leather pouch, loosened the top, and counted out eleven coins. He then handed the amount to the young man.

“The payment has been received.” The young man did not do something like checking the coins for authenticity in front of Sebas. He had traded with them often enough to earn their trust.

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“That old gentleman was cool!”

“Yeah!”

After Sebas exited the Magician Guild, the receptionists, especially the women, gathered together and started to make a fuss. Rather than the faces of sagacious women, they had the faces of girls who had met their adored prince. One of the men who sat at the counter frowned with jealousy, but having experienced Sebas’ elegance firsthand, remained quiet.

“He must have served under some incredibly high ranking noble before. It wouldn’t be strange if he was the third son of some rich noble’s household.”

Even for nobles, it was common for those who could not inherit the household to become butlers or maids. The more prestigious a noble's title, the more they wished to employ such servants. The air of elegance surrounding Sebas made others believe that he was a noble himself.

"He carried himself incredibly well."

The group behind the counter all nodded their heads in agreement.

"I think I would definitely say yes if he asked me out for tea."

"Yeah, I'll go! I'll go! Definitely!"

The girls clamored with high pitched voices. Like how he seemed to be the type to be familiar with incredibly elegant shops. How he would be the perfect escort and such. The men glanced at them from the side and held their own discussion.

"He seemed quite educated. Could he also be a magic caster?"

"Maybe, it's possible."

The spells that Sebas picked out were always the ones that were recently invented. That was why they could guess that he possessed ample knowledge about magic. If he were here on orders to purchase a spell, then he could simply say the name directly at the counter without going through the book. The fact that he made the selection after looking through the list meant that he himself made the judgment on what spells to purchase. He was definitely not an ordinary old man. In other words, it was not unusual to think that he was a tutor in magic— a magic caster.

"And those glasses… didn't they seem incredibly expensive?"

"Could it be a magic item?"

"No, isn't it just a luxury item? Maybe a dwarf made it."

"Right, he's pretty incredible to own such a beautiful pair of glasses."

"I want to see the beauty he brought with him that one time."

The words that the man muttered almost as an afterthought was met with voices of opposition from next to him. "What~? The only thing she had going for her was her appearance."

"Yeah, I felt sorry Sebas-san. He's definitely being overworked."

"Even if she's beautiful, she definitely has a bad personality. I didn't like the way she looked at us. I feel sorry for Sebas-san for having to serve someone like that."

The severe criticism on the same sex from the women caused the men to shut their mouths. Sebas' master possessed a beauty that would make others fall in love with her in an instant. Although the women next to them were beautiful enough to be picked as the faces of the Magician Guild, the difference was like night and day. Even though the male workers wanted to tell them not to be

jealous, it was obvious what would happen if they were to do so. There was no one among them who would be that foolish. That was why—

"Hey, enough with the chitchat." The young man spotted an adventurer heading towards the counter and directed his voice at the group, prompting them to put on a serious expression and continue with their jobs.

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Having left the Magician Guild, Sebas glanced up at the sky. Because escorting the old woman back home took longer than he expected, the sky was gradually being dyed red. Although his watch showed that it was time for curfew, he still wasn't finished with his daily tasks. Since it wasn't a problem, should he push back the rest for tomorrow? Or perhaps he should finish the rest of his work, even if it meant going past the allotted time. His hesitation only lasted an instant. Helping the old woman was his arbitrary decision, he had to take responsibility.

"—Shadow Demon." *Twitch*. Sebas felt his shadow stir. "Please send word to Solution. Tell her that I will be a little late. That is all." Although there was no answer, the presence moved and became distant, as if it was moving between shadows.

"Now then…" Sebas moved his feet. He did not have a destination. His goal was to completely map out the geography of the capital. He wasn't commanded to do it; rather, it was out of his own free will as part of his information gathering.

"Let us head in that direction today." Having muttered so, Sebas rubbed his hair back and spun the scroll he held in one hand. He was like a child enjoying himself. He walked farther and farther out from the center of the capital, from where the public order was best.

After winding through the roads, the streets started to become dirty and a slightly foul stench began to permeate the air. It was the smell of rotten foods and sewage. Sebas walked silently through the stench that threatened to cling on to his clothes. Sebas abruptly stopped his stride and looked around his surroundings. He appeared to have ventured into a back alleyway. The path was just barely wide enough to allow two people to pass each other.

The narrow alleyway and the setting sun, no sign of people anywhere, they made it difficult for people to take this road. But none of that posed a problem for Sebas. He walked on in silence, melting into the darkness. Sebas turned multiple corners in a direction that was more desolate than the last and suddenly, his unfaltering steps came to a halt.

Without a specific destination in mind, he had been walking to wherever his feet and whims may take him. However, he found that he had ventured quite far from the residence he had established as their base. Using his intuition, Sebas roughly perceived his current location and drew a line in his head from here to the base.

Although it was a trivial distance considering Sebas' physical ability, that only applied when moving in a straight line. Walking normally would end up taking quite a bit of time. Since it was almost time for the curtain of night to fall, it would be prudent for him to start heading back. He did not want to worry Solution whom he was staying with. Should a strong enemy appear, both Solution and Sebas had a Shadow Demon hiding in their shadows. Using them as shields would give them ample time to retreat. However—

"…I should be heading back." Though honestly, he wanted to continue his walk for a bit longer. This was almost like his hobby; he would often lose track of time when it came to his outings. However, even if he had to withdraw, Sebas felt that he should at least see what was past this road and decided to continue down the narrow alleyway.

As he walked silently through the darkness, a sudden creaking noise rang out fifteen meters in front of him. A heavy iron door slowly opened up ahead, spilling its interior lights outside. Sebas stopped and quietly observed the scene in front of him. When the door was opened all the way, a person's face came into view. Although he could only discern the silhouette because of the backlight, it was probably a man. He appeared to examine his surroundings and, failing to notice Sebas, went back inside.

Thud. Suddenly, a heavy sack was flung out the door and crashed on to the ground. The light leaking from the door fell on the sack, and by its shape, made it apparent that something soft was being held inside. Although the door was open, the man who threw the sack as if he was taking out the trash did not yet reappear.

For a moment, Sebas frowned then wondered whether he should walk past it or head back the way he came. He had run into quite a bothersome incident. After a brief hesitation, he continued down the quiet and narrow path of the dark alleyway. The mouth of the large sack split open. The sound of Sebas' footsteps rang through the alley and at last, the distance between him and sack shortened.

As he was about to walk past, his feet stopped. Sebas felt something touch his pants. He lowered his gaze and there, found what he had expected to see. Extending from the sack, an emaciated, twig-like hand holding onto the hem of his pants and the topless body of a girl. The sack was now opened wide, fully revealing the girl from the waist up.

Her blue pupils held no strength, glossed over in a murky glint. The hair that fell down to her shoulders was withered due to a lack of nutrients. Her face was beaten, swollen like a balloon. Her dry, cracked skin was littered with countless pink spots the size of fingernails. The scrawny body had almost no life remaining. It was already no different from a corpse. No, it was obviously still alive. The hand grasping on to the hem of Sebas' pants claimed as much. But could you call someone who could only just barely breathe as being alive?

"…Will you please release your hand?" There was no response to his words. It was obvious that she wasn't ignoring him despite hearing what he said. Past the swollen cracks of her eyelids, there was nothing reflected in her murky eyes as they stared into space. If Sebas were to move his feet, he could easily brush aside those fingers that were thinner than tree branches. However, he did not do so and instead, asked her once more: "…Are you in trouble? If so—"

"—Hey, old man, where'd you come from." A low, menacing voice interrupted Sebas. A man appeared from the doorway. Thick chest and arms with a scar on his face, the man glared sharply at Sebas with a hostility that was plain for anyone to see. The lantern in his hand shined a red light.

"Oi, oi, oi. What're you staring at, old man?" The man loudly clicked his tongue and gestured with his chin. "Get lost. If you leave now, then I'll let you go in one piece." Seeing that Sebas did not move even after his warning, the man took a step forward. The door behind him slammed shut with a heavy thud. Very slowly, the man menacingly set down the lantern at his feet. "Hey

gramps, you deaf?" The man spun his shoulder, cracked his neck, and slowly raised his right fist. He obviously was not someone who would hesitate to resort to violence.

"Hmm…" Sebas smiled, one well suited for the expression of an elderly gentleman. His smile made others feel his kindness and experience a powerful sense of relief. But for some reason, the man took a step back, as if a powerful carnivore had appeared in front of him without warning. "Uhh, uh, uh, wha—", pressed back by Sebas' smile, the man uttered incoherently. Without even realizing that his breathing grew harsh, the man tried to retreat back farther.

Sebas fastened the scroll he had been holding in his hand until now to his belt, the one he bought from the Magician's Guild. He took exactly one step forward in order to close the distance between him and the man and stretched out his hand. The man could not even react to that movement. The hand that was grasping onto the hem of Sebas' pants fell to the ground without a sound.

As if that was the signal, the outstretched hand grabbed the man's throat and— too easily, his body was lifted into the air. When comparing Sebas with the man based solely on their outer appearance, Sebas had no chance of victory. Age, thickness of the chest, arms, height, weight, and the smell of violence that their bodies exuded, Sebas could not beat him in anything. That old gentleman had lifted the powerful heavyweight of a man into the air with one hand—

No, that wasn't the case. If there was a third party present, that person may be able to keenly sense the 'difference' between the two men. Humans possessed the senses of living creatures— even if they were duller than that of wild animals, would they not realize it if such a clear distinction was placed before them? The 'difference' between Sebas and the man was—

The difference between the strongest and the weakest. Now completely off the ground, the man thrashed his feet about and twisted his body. As he tried to grab Sebas' arm with his hands, his eyes filled with terror, as if he had come to a realization. The man had just managed to figure out that the old man in front of him was an existence completely at odds with his outer appearance. Useless retaliation would only serve to further anger the monster in front of him.

"That girl, 'what' is she?" A quiet voice flowed into the man who had stiffened up with fear. His voice flowed quietly, like clear water. The stark contrast with how he was easily holding the man in the air with one hand only served to terrify him further.

"S-She's our employee." The man responded desperately, his voice etched in fear.

"I asked 'what' she was. Are you replying to my question by saying that she is an 'employee'?"

The man wondered if he had given the wrong answer. But was that not the most correct reply in this situation? His wide eyes looked about frantically, moving around like the eyes of a scared animal.

"Ah, there are some among my comrades who also treat humans like objects. I ventured to guess whether or not you also fall under that category. If you saw humans as objects, then you would not feel any remorse. But you replied by referring to her as an employee. Then you have done what you did while recognizing her as a human, correct? I will ask you again. What were you going to do with her?"

The man thought briefly. However—

A sound like something being crushed rang out. Strength went into Sebas' arm, instantly making it painful for the man to breathe.

"—urrkgahhh!" The man screamed with a bizarre noise as Sebas channeled strength into his hand, making it even more difficult for him to breathe. 'I will not give you the time to ponder, answer immediately.' His message was clear.

"S-She's sick. I was taking her to the temp—"

"—I do not like lies."

"Gaaghhah!"

The strength in Sebas' arm grew even stronger and the man's face became dyed completely red as he screamed out once more. Even if he could suspend all disbelief and acknowledge that putting her into a sack to transport her to the temple was a possibility, Sebas could not sense even a shred of concern from the man towards the girl when that same sack was dashed against the ground, like he was throwing out the trash.

"Stop… Gaah." With his air escaping him, the man's life was in danger. He started to flail his legs, unable to think of anything else. Sebas easily blocked the fist heading for his face with one hand. Although the man's flailing legs slammed into his body and dirtied his clothes, Sebas did not budge.

It was obvious. A normal human cannot move a giant block of steel with their feet. Although he was kicked by a pair of thick legs, Sebas calmly continued to speak, as if he wasn't even in pain. "I recommend that you speak truthfully."

"Urk—", with the man no longer able to breathe, Sebas narrowed his eyes as he looked up at the man's reddened face. He aimed for the moment just before he lost consciousness and released him. The man rolled onto the floor with a loud noise.

"Uugh, haa, haa, haa." He expelled the last of the air that remained in his lungs with a scream and greedily gasped for breath. Sebas looked down at him in silence. He then reached once more for the man's throat.

"W-wait, h-hold on!" With fear piercing his body, he painfully stumbled on the floor, away from Sebas' hand. "T-T-Temple! I was going to take her to the temple!"

Still with the lies, his willpower is unexpectedly strong… He had expected the man to break under the pain and the fear of death. However, despite being frightened, he showed no signs of spilling the truth. The danger of leaking information rivaled the danger that Sebas posed. Sebas considered changing his approach. In some sense, this place was enemy territory.

The reason the man did not call for help from beyond the door was because he did not expect any of his allies to respond immediately. Regardless, staying any longer will cause the situation to become more bothersome. He did not receive any orders to cause trouble for his master, only to keep himself hidden and quietly collect information.

"If that is what you were planning then there will not be a problem even if I am the one to take her. I will make sure that she recovers." The man's surprised eyes shook side-to-side. He then desperately squeezed out his next words.

"…There's no guarantee that you'll take her there."

"Then how about if you accompany me?"

"I'm busy right now so I can't. I'm going to take her later."

Sensing something in Sebas' expression, the man quickly continued on. "That's legally ours. If you're going to put your hands on other people's property, then you're breaking the law! If you take her with you then it's kidnapping!"

Sebas froze abruptly and furrowed his brows for the first time. The man attacked where it hurt the most. Although his master had said that it was okay to stand out to a certain extent, that only applied when it was necessary for their disguises as a rich family's daughter and her butler.

If he broke the law and invited the hand of the judiciaries, there was a possibility that their cover could be blown. In other words, it could lead to a huge uproar and become exactly the type of conspicuous incident that his master did not want.

Although it was hard to imagine that this rugged, crude looking man was educated, his tone was still confident. He must have heard it from someone who was knowledgeable about the law. Then there was a high possibility that his claim held true. With no witnesses in sight, the answer was simple. He could simply end it through force. All that would leave behind was a corpse with a broken neck.

But that was only when it was absolutely necessary. It was a final, last-ditch method to be used only when it coincided with his master's objective. It could not be used for the sake of this unknown girl whom he had just met. Then was abandoning the girl the right choice? Sebas felt his irritation rise at the man's crude smile.

"Can a great, gentlemanly butler like you cause trouble for your master behind their back?" The man was grinning now, seeing how Sebas' frown became more obvious, he must have realized that he had a hold on the butler's weakness.

"I don't know which noble you serve, but won't you be harming your master if you cause trouble? Ahn? And who knows, that noble might have a good relationship with us. Won't you get scolded?"

"…Did you think that my master was someone who could not handle the law? Rules were made to be broken by the strong." As if he hit a nerve, the man looked momentarily frightened but immediately regained his confidence.

"…So how about you try it then?"

"… …Hmm." The man showed no signs of falling for Sebas' bluff. The one backing him must be quite an influential figure indeed. Concluding that attacking from this direction was ineffective, Sebas decided to approach from a different angle.

"…You may be right. A run in with the law may indeed prove quite troublesome. However, there is also a law stating that a person may rescue another by force should they request it. I am merely following the law and providing her with assistance. First and foremost, since she appears to be unconscious, I believe she should be brought to the temple for treatment. Do you not agree?"

"Uh… no… that's…" The man seemed to be at a loss for words. His mask was undone. Sebas felt relieved that the man was a poor actor and a dim-witted fool. He had lied. Since the other party mentioned the law, Sebas simply opted to do the same. Sebas, being unfamiliar with this country's laws, would have had no way to respond if the man had rebuked him once more with another law; even if the man had been lying. The man ended up in this position because he only knew the law by ear and did not bother to study it.

Because his knowledge of the law was what he had heard off hand, it would come back to bite him should his opponent opt for a legal debate. And the man was most likely a low-ranking member of his organization. He was not used to a position where he had to make his own decisions. Sebas turned his eyes away from the man and brought the girl's head close. "Do you want me to help you?"

Sebas asked her. He leaned his ear towards the girl's cracked, rustling lips. The sound of faint breathing flowed into his ears. No, could it even be called as such? It was like the sound of the final remaining air escaping from a balloon. There was no response. Sebas slightly turned his head and asked once more: "Do you want me to help you?"

The circumstances revolving around aiding this girl and the old woman from before were completely different. Although Sebas did desire to help others in need, there was a high possibility that helping this girl will lead to no small amount of trouble. Sebas felt as if a chilling wind was passing through his heart. He worried whether or not the Supreme Being would permit such actions, about how this may betray a higher objective.

As expected, there was no reply. The man's face slowly broke out into a crude smile. For someone who was familiar with her hell-like environment, it was obvious that she would not even have the energy to speak. Otherwise, he would not have pulled her out to dispose of her in the first place. A stroke of luck does not occur in succession. If it were so frequent, then it would not be called luck in the first place.

That's right. If the hand that grasped the hem of Sebas' pants was a stroke of good fortune, there would not be a second time. Her luck had run out the moment Sebas stepped foot in this place. Everything that would follow after was the result of her will to live. That… would never be because of luck.

— Slightly. Ever so slightly, her mouth moved. Her voice did not flow naturally like how one would breathe. They contained a clear, distinct will. "—"

Hearing those words, Sebas gave a single nod. "…I have no intention of saving those who only pray for others to extend a helping hand, like plants waiting for the rain. However… if they themselves fight to survive…"

Sebas covered the girl's eyes with his hand. "Do not be frightened, rest now. I will place you under my protection." Clinging onto some soft, warm sensation, the girl closed her murky eyes. The man was in disbelief and tried to voice his obvious response.

"You're ly…" The rest could not be heard. The man's body froze, his voice dying in his throat. "Did you just say that I am lying?" Before anyone had noticed, Sebas stood up, piercing the man with his gaze. His eyes were terrifying. The man's breath was cut short by the sensation of his heart on the verge of exploding. "Are you claiming that I would lie to the likes of you?"

"Uh, n…no…" *Gulp.* The man's throat moved as he swallowed the large amount of saliva that had gathered in his mouth. His eyes became nailed to Sebas' arm. The fear that he had foolishly forgotten from not knowing his place had returned.

"Then I will be taking her with me."

"Y-you can't! No, no, sir, you can't!"

Sebas glanced over at the man who had raised his voice. "Do you still have something to say? Are you trying to buy time?"

"N-no sir, that's not it. I'm telling you that it's going to be a huge problem if you take that girl, to you and your master both. Eight Fingers, don't you know them?"

Sebas had heard of them from his information gathering. They were a criminal organization that operated from the Kingdom's shadow. "You understand, right? Please sir, just pretend that you didn't see anything. If you take her then they're going to punish me for screwing up."

The man had realized that he could not win with strength and adopted a flattering demeanor. Sebas looked at him coldly and spoke in an equally cold voice. "I will take her with me."

"Spare me, I'm begging you! I'll be a dead man!"

Perhaps I should kill him right here. Sebas fell into thought. He could hear the man crying even while weighing the positive and negative consequences of killing him. Although he thought that the man could be trying to buy time for his allies to arrive, he ruled out that possibility from seeing his behavior.

"Why do you not call for help?" The man blinked and replied immediately. According to him, if he were to lose them while he looked for help, the fact that he made a critical mistake would become known to his allies. He also did not think it likely that they could win in a fight, even with more people. That was why he was trying to convince Sebas to change his mind. Seeing such woefully pathetic behavior, Sebas felt the tension leave his body. His killing intent had all but vanished. Although, with that said, he had no intention of handing the girl over to the man. If so—

"…Then how about you flee?"

"That's impossible sir. I don't have the money for that."

"Though I do not think it would be more expensive than your life… I will provide you with the funds."

The light returned to the man's face from Sebas' words. Although it may be safer to kill him, if he desperately escaped then it may at least buy some time. Meanwhile, he can treat her wounds and move her somewhere safe. And if he were to kill the man here, there was a good chance that they would search for the girl who immediately went missing.

Similar to how the circumstances leading up to the girl ending up in her current situation were unknown, he could not rule out the possibility of this harming her acquaintances and family. Sebas was troubled. Why was he going so far as to take on all of these risks? He did not understand where the stirring in his heart to save this girl came from. Other denizens of Nazarick would have ignored it, saying that they couldn't be bothered. They would have shaken her hand loose and walked off.

One must help others in need. Sebas responded to the man, setting aside the swaying of his heart that even he himself could not explain. Now was not the time for such thoughts. "Use this money to hire an adventurer and do everything you can to escape." As Sebas took out a leather pouch, the man's eyes filled with doubt. The amount of money that could fit inside a small pouch would not be enough.

However, in the next moment, the man's eyes became glued to the coins that were tossed onto the ground. The silver-like glint was that of the platinum used when dealing with trade between countries. Worth ten times more than gold, ten of such coins were scattered about. "Everything, do you understand? I also have a few questions. How much time do you have to answer?"

"Uh, we're good for time. Getting rid… um, no, I told them that I would be leaving to take her to the temple so I can be a little late."

"I see. Then let us be off." Keeping his words brief, Sebas motioned for the man to follow him with his chin and walked on with the girl in his arms.

Part 2

The current house where Sebas resided was in an affluent neighborhood with high public order, even by the capital's standards. Although the size paled in comparison to the neighboring houses, it looked to be built so that two generations of families and their servants could live together. For only Sebas and Solution, the space was simply too large.

Needless to say, they had a reason for renting such a large mansion. As long as they were disguised as the family of a wealthy merchant from a far-off land, they could not live in a shabby residence. That was why, with zero connections and credibility, they had to put up with paying for the entirety of the lease at several times the market price.

Having arrived at such a residence and entering through the front door, there was someone who was there to welcome him. Wearing a white dress, it was battle maid Solution Epsilon under Sebas' direct command. Although there were other inhabitants like the Shadow Demon and Gargoyle, they did not come to receive him because they were placed as guards.

"Welcome ba—", Solution's words stopped along with her head in mid bow. Her eyes were colder than usual as she stared at what was in Sebas' arms. "…Sebas-sama. What is that?"

“I’ve picked her up.” Solution did not say anything to his short reply. However, the atmosphere grew heavy. “…Is that so. Though it does not look to be a present for me, what are you planning to do with it?”

“I’m uncertain. Could you first treat her wounds?”

“Wounds you say…” After looking over the girl’s condition, Solution nodded her head as if convinced and stared at Sebas. “Then could you not have dropped her off at the temple?”

“…But of course. Truly, the thought must have escaped me.” Solution narrowed her eyes and stared coldly at Sebas who would not even give an inch. For the briefest of moments, their eyes locked, and the one who looked away first was Solution.

“Shall I throw it out?”

“No. Since I already went through the trouble of bringing her here, we may as well come up with a way to put her to good use.”

“…Understood.” Solution was never one for many expressions, but her current face was truly like that of a mask. Even Sebas could not recognize the emotion that was filling her eyes. Only that she did not at all welcome the current situation. It was so obvious that you could almost touch with your hands.

“First, could you perform a diagnosis of her physical condition?”

“Understood, I will do so immediately.”

“No, right here is a bit…” Although Solution may deem it trivial, it probably should not be done near the entrance. “We have an empty room so may I ask you to perform it there?” Solution nodded without a word. There were no words spoken between them as the girl was moved from the entrance to the guest room. Although neither Solution nor Sebas were the type to partake in needless chatter, even more so, an ambiguous atmosphere flowed between them.

Solution opened the guest room door since Sebas was using both hands to carry the girl. Despite the thick curtain darkening the room, the air did not feel stuffy in the least. The air was fresh because the door had been opened many times and the interior was kept immaculate. Sebas stepped inside, small rays of moonlight shining through the slips in the curtains. He laid the girl on top of the bed’s clean sheets. Although he tried his best to heal her by pouring in his Ki, the unmoving body looked like a corpse.

“Then.” Solution nonchalantly tore off the cloth wrapped around the girl, revealing her ragged limbs. Though it was a cruel appearance that should have invited pity, there was no change in Solution’s expression. Her eyes reflected nothing but dull indifference.

“…Solution, I will leave the rest to you.” Sebas left her with only those words and exited the room. Solution did not bother to stop him as she began to check the girl’s condition. After stepping out into the hallway, Sebas muttered quietly so that it would not reach Solution’s ears.

“A foolish endeavor.” Sebas unwittingly stroked his beard. Why did he save her? He himself could not explain clearly. Perhaps this is what it means for a hunter to not slay a bird that came to

him of its own accord. No, that wasn't it. Why did he save her? As the butler who was also tasked with the role of house steward, his allegiance was with the 41 Supreme Beings. At present, his guild leader, the one who took on the name of Ainz Ooal Gown was the being whom he owed the entirety of his allegiance.

There was not even a shadow of falsehood in his loyalty. He believed that he had always served diligently and would not hesitate to lay down his life in service. However— if he had to pledge his loyalty to only one among the 41 Supreme Beings, Sebas would choose without hesitation. Touch Me.

He was Sebas' creator and the strongest existence of 'Ainz Ooal Gown', holder of the World Champion class and in a different league altogether. As part of the First Nine, he gathered the original members of Ainz Ooal Gown before it grew in power through every possible means, including PK.

No one would believe it if they were told that his reason was to help the weak. However, it was the truth. He helped Momonga when he was about to quit the game in frustration from being PKed continuously. When Bukubuku Chagama could not find a party to adventure with because of her appearance, he was the one who approached her first. The thoughts that person left behind became the invisible chains wrapping around Sebas.

"Could this be a curse…?" What vile words. If a different person from Ainz Ooal Gown— a member of Nazarick created by the 41 Supreme Beings— had heard him, they may have called him a blasphemer and attacked.

『 Feeling pity for a being who is not of Nazarick is unacceptable. 』

Those words were most obvious. With a few exceptions — those whose settings were established to be such by the 41 Supreme Beings, head maid Pestonya S. Wanko for example — excluding people like her, the members of Nazarick all believed that those who do not belong with Ainz Ooal Gown should immediately be cast out.

For instance, he had heard from one of Solution's reports that a member of Pleiades, Lupusregina, was on friendly terms with a girl from Carne village. But he knew very well that depending on the situation, Lupusregina would abandon her without a second thought. It was not because she was heartless.

An order from the Supreme Beings to die meant that you must die. Likewise, even if she was a friend, an order to kill her would be carried out swiftly. That was true loyalty. A fellow denizen who did not understand this would be looked on with pity. Judging humans with useless sentiment, that in itself was unacceptable. Then what about him? Was his current course of action acceptable? As Sebas bit his lips, Solution walked out through the door. Her face was emotionless per usual.

"How is she?"

"…On top of syphilis, she has two other venereal diseases. Several of her ribs are cracked, as well as her fingers. The tendons in her right arm and left leg have been severed and she is missing her top and bottom front teeth. It appears that her internal organs are failing as well. There are

lacerations in her anus and it is possible that she is addicted to some drug. She has countless contusions and cuts on her body. Considering her current state, I believe that I can leave out the rest…. Would you like me to explain further?"

"No, there is no need. There is only one thing that is important. Can she be healed?"

"Of course."

Sebas had expected her prompt answer. Using a healing ability can fix even amputations. If Sebas were to use his qigong, it would also be easy to completely fix bodily injuries. In truth, if he wanted, he could have easily healed the old woman's sprained ankle on the spot. He did not do so in order to save it for emergencies and to prevent leaking information. But even if qigong helped recover one's strength, it could not heal poisons or diseases. Sebas never learned such skills. That was why he needed Solution's help for the recovery.

"Then I will leave it to you."

"Would it not be better to call for Pestonya-sama for healing magic?"

"That will not be necessary. Solution, I believe you have a healing scroll?"

Confirming that Solution nodded her head, Sebas continued.

"Then please use that."

"…Sebas-sama. This scroll was given to us by the Supreme Beings. I believe that it should not be used on the likes of humans." It was a reasonable argument. He had to consider a different method. First, heal her injuries and save her from the danger of death. They could then heal the poisons and diseases at a later time. However, he was not certain that they could afford to delay. If it were the poisons and diseases that was killing her, endlessly restoring her health would prove useless.

After some hesitation, in the end, he spoke to Solution in a steely voice that would not betray his inner thoughts. "Heal her." Solution's eyes narrowed and at the same time, something dark red stirred within her pupils. But that change could not be verified any further due to Solution bowing her head.

"…I will carry out your order. Restoring her to normal condition— in other words, will it be fine to restore her body to the state before the injuries were inflicted on her?" Seeing Sebas give his affirmation, Solution courteously bowed her head. "I will begin immediately."

"And once her treatment is finished, will you please fill the tub with water and bathe her? I will leave to purchase a meal." There was no one in this residence who needed meals or could cook. And as long as they did not have an extra of the magic item that rendered meals unnecessary, the girl's meals had to be prepared.

"…Sebas-sama, although it is easy to heal her bodily wounds… I cannot heal her mind." Solution's words came to a stop, and after a brief pause, she stared intently at Sebas and asked. "I feel that calling Ainz-sama will be the best way to heal her mind. Will you not do so?"

"…This is not a matter significant enough to warrant contacting him. There should not be a problem even if we leave her mind as is."

Solution bowed deeply. She silently opened the door to the room and stepped inside. Sebas watched her go and then slowly leaned his back to the wall. What to do about the girl… Once she's healed— while the man escapes, release her at a place of her own choosing. That was the best way. At the very least, it should be somewhere far from the capital. Releasing her here was both dangerous and cruel. It would be no different than not rescuing her in the first place.

But for Sebas Tian, the butler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, was that really the right course of action? Sebas breathed a heavy sigh. How comfortable would he feel if he could expel everything that was mounting in his mind, just like this sigh? But nothing had changed. His mind fell into confusion and his thinking was filled with noise.

"Foolish, all because of one human…" Rather than asking questions that he could not answer, he had to start simple. Although it would only serve to buy him time, from his point of view, this was the best course of action in his current situation.

♦ ♦ ♦

Solution changed the shape of her skinny fingers. They grew longer and transformed into tendrils that were about a few millimeters thick. Originally, Solution was a formless slime and could drastically alter her outer appearance. Something like transforming the tip of her hands was simple. She glanced over at the door and having keenly sensed that Sebas' presence had disappeared outside, quietly walked over to the girl lying on the bed.

"Since Sebas-sama has given his permission, I will finish this bothersome task as quickly as possible. That would be in your best interest as well. You probably will not even be awake through it." Solution spread her palm and pulled out the scroll that she kept stored in her body. This scroll wasn't the only thing Solution kept in her body. On top of consumable magic items like the scroll, she also had various weapons and armor. Considering that she could easily swallow several humans, something like that was not out of the norm.

Solution stared at the unconscious girl. She had no interest in the girl's appearance. Rather, only one thought crossed her mind. This human did not look tasty. The empty shell of a body did not seem like it would thrash around very much even if she were to melt it with acid.

"Though I could understand his actions if he wanted to give this to me as a toy after it recovered…" Knowing his personality, she knew he would not allow it. Aside from when they were attacked during their travels, Sebas, the boss of Battle Maid Pleiades would never permit feeding on humans.

"If the Supreme Being had ordered that the girl be saved, I would have no choice but to accept it… But are the likes of humans truly worth saving even at the cost of a valuable fortune granted by the Supreme Being?" Solution shook her head and thought out loud. "…I may just devour you before Sebas-sama returns."

She released the seal and opened the scroll. The magic contained within it was 'Heal', a 6th tier healing spell that greatly restored health and removed bad status effects like diseases. A normal scroll could only be used if the person possessed a class that could use the same branch of magic

as the scroll. In other words, in order to use a scroll of a faith based magic caster like a priest, one had to obtain a faith based class.

To explain further, the spell had to exist on the list of learnable magic for that class. However, some thief based classes have a skill that can disguise this list and deceive the scroll. As an assassin, Solution possessed several thief-based classes. It was why she was able to use the 'Heal' scroll that she would normally be barred from.

"First, put her into a coma just in case, then…" Solution used a skill to combine a powerful poison that induced sleep and a muscle relaxing poison. She then moved to cover the girl's body.

♦ ♦ ♦

Month of Equinox Fire (Month 8), Day 26, 19:37

Sebas returned with the meal just as Solution stepped out of the room. She held a steaming bucket of water in both hands, with several towels in each bucket. The water in both buckets was dark and the towels were dirty as well, showing just what sort of unsanitary conditions the girl lived in.

"You've worked hard. The recovery… it seems that it was completed without a hitch."

"Yes, there were no problems, only that there was no suitable clothing for her so I changed her into whatever we had on hand. Was that acceptable?"

"Of course, it does not matter."

"Is that so… The effects of the sleeping poison should have worn off by now. …If there is nothing else then I will take my leave."

"Good work, Solution."

Solution bowed and walked past Sebas. Sebas saw her off, and then knocked on the door. Although there was no reply, he felt movement from within and quietly opened the door. Inside, a girl was sitting up on the bed. She wore a vacant expression, as if she had woken only recently.

She was truly unrecognizable. The dirty and withered blonde hair now shined with a beautiful luster. In that short amount of time, her sunken, scrawny face had been vitalized and regained its original appearance. Her once shriveled, cracked lips now shone with a pink glint.

To describe her appearance as a whole, rather than calling her beautiful, it was more fitting to call her as a girl who possessed an adorable charm. It was also easy to get a general idea of her age. Although she looked like she should be in her late teens, her hellish daily life gave her face a dignity that extended past her years. Solution had put her into a white negligee. However, it was of a simple design, lacking the usual laces and frills that were the norm.

"You should have recovered completely, but how is your condition?" There was no reply. Her vacant eyes did not show any signs of looking in his direction. However, as if he did not take that to heart, Sebas waited for her to speak. No, he did not expect much from the beginning. He had realized that her vacant expression was that of a person whose heart was no longer here.

“Are you hungry? I’ve brought you a meal.” He had purchased it from a restaurant, bowl and all. The wooden bowl held a stew that was made from slightly seasoned meat broth. The oil added to the stew to accentuate its scent released a smell that stimulated the appetite. Her face moved slightly, responding to the smell.

“Please help yourself.” Sebas thought that she had not yet completely walled herself off in her own world. He held out the bowl along with the wooden spoon in front of her. Even when the girl did not move, Sebas did not try to force her. After a certain amount of time had passed, enough to make others feel anxious, the girl slowly moved her arm. Her movement was nervous, one that feared pain. Even if her injuries had been healed completely, the memory of the pain remained untouched.

She held the wooden spoon and lifted a small amount of the stew. She then brought it to her mouth and swallowed. The stew was watery and thin. Sebas had intentionally ordered it to be prepared that way, thinly slicing fourteen types of ingredients and cooking them for a long time so that there would not be a need to chew. Her throat moved and the stew traveled down into her stomach.

The girl’s eyes moved ever so slightly. That tiniest of movements was the transformation from an elaborate doll to a human being. Her other hand moved, trembling as it accepted the bowl from Sebas. While carrying the bowl, Sebas moved it to the place where she seemed to want it placed. The girl stuck the wooden spoon into the stew, hugging the bowl closer to her with her other arm, and ate with an overflowing vigor.

She ate so fast that if the stew had not been cooled to be just right, she would definitely have screamed out in pain from the burns. The girl did not even seem to mind that the chest area of her negligee was being dirtied by the stew trailing out of her mouth. It would have been more fitting to say that she was drinking it, rather than eating it. After finishing the stew blindingly quickly, the girl drew the empty bowl close and breathed out a sigh.

Having returned to being human, her eyes shut heavily. The feeling of being full, the clean and soft clothes, the softness that had returned to her body, all of these synergized together to relax her mind and began allowing her body to accept the feeling of drowsiness. But as her eyelids began to form a line, in the next moment, the girl opened her eyes wide and cowered in fear.

Perhaps she was scared to close her eyes, or maybe she feared that her current situation would vanish like an illusion. Or perhaps she had another reason, Sebas, who was watching her by her side, could not tell. Perhaps she herself did not know the reason. That was why Sebas spoke to her in a gentle voice in an attempt to calm her.

“Your body is seeking rest. Do not push yourself and sleep. I guarantee that you are in no danger here. You will still be in this bed when you open your eyes.” For the first time, the girl’s eyes moved and stared directly at Sebas. There was barely any light in her blue eyes; no strength could be felt from them. Only that they were no longer the eyes of the dead, but the living.

Her mouth parted slightly and— closed. She opened her mouth once more and— again, closed. That was repeated several times over. Sebas watched gently and did not try to pressure her. He merely stared in silence. “Th…” At last, the lips parted and a tiny voice leaked through. The words that followed came quickly. “Th…tha…nk… you…”

Her first words were those of thanks rather than questions about her current situation. Having caught a glimpse of her personality, Sebas smiled, not the fake one that he wore so often, but a genuine smile.

"Please do not worry about it. Now that I have brought you under my wing, I will guarantee your safety to the best of my ability." The girl's eyes widened slightly, her lips trembling. Her blue eyes grew wet and spilled drops of tears. She then opened her mouth wide and cried like something was released inside of her.

At last, her curse spilled out, mixed in with the sound of sobbing. She cursed her own fate; she hated the one up above who dealt her such a hand. She resented the fact that up until now, no one had bothered to help her. That feeling of resentment then turned to Sebas.

Why didn't he come to her sooner? Sebas' kindness— because she was treated as a human, everything that she had been enduring all this time had come crumbling down. No, it would be better to say that because she regained her human heart, she could no longer endure all of those memories.

The girl pulled at her head. With a tearing sound, strands of her hair were ripped free. Countless gold threads became entangled around her thin fingers. The bowl that carried the stew fell off the bed along with the spoon.

Sebas watched over her madness without a word. Her resentment was sudden and clumsy; she was pushing herself. Depending on the person, they may have found her resentment offensive and raged at her. However, there was no anger in Sebas' expression. Instead, his wrinkled face carried something akin to benevolence.

Sebas reached out and pulled her into his arms. Like a father hugging his child, an affectionate embrace with no ill intentions. Although her body momentarily stiffened, the embrace that was different from those of the men who lusted after her slightly relaxed her frozen body.

"It's okay now." He softly patted her on the back as he repeated those words like a chant, like consoling a crying child. A hiccup— and as if she were trying to cling onto Sebas' words, the girl planted her face into his chest and cried even louder. However, that cry was different than the one from before.

♦ ♦ ♦

As time passed and Sebas' chest became completely damp with the girl's tears, the sound of her cries finally came to a rest. The girl slowly separated herself from Sebas and lowered her head in an attempt to hide her bright red face. "I'm… sorry…"

"Please do not let it bother you. It is a great honor for a man to lend his chest to a crying woman." Sebas pulled out a freshly washed handkerchief and handed it to the girl. "Please use this."

"But… it's so clean… if… I…"

Sebas held the stammering girl's chin and raised her face. While the girl grew stiff as she wondered what was going to happen, he gently brought the handkerchief to her remaining tear marks.

This reminds me; Solution just recently used 'Message' and had a long conversation with Shalltear… It seems she was boasting about how Ainz-sama wiped away her tears. He wondered just what sort of situation would end up with Ainz-sama doing such a thing. He was unable to even picture the image of Shalltear crying. Despite his confusion, Sebas did not stop his hands and finished wiping the tears from the girl's face.

"Ah…"

"There, please use it." Sebas closed the girl's hand around the now slightly damp handkerchief. "A handkerchief that cannot be used is a sad one indeed, especially one that cannot even wipe away a person's tears." Sebas smiled and stepped away from the girl. "Now, please get plenty of rest. Let us discuss what to do from now on once you awake."

Because anything was possible with magic, her injuries were healed through Solution's treatment and all of her mental fatigue was gone. That was why she should now be able to move normally. However, it was only a few hours ago that she was in hell. There was a concern that talking for too long may cause her mental injuries to reopen.

In reality, like how she cried just recently, the girl's mind was still unstable. Although magic could temporarily heal her mind, it did not treat the root of the problem. Unlike bodily wounds, it was not possible to treat injuries that were not plain to see. Among the people Sebas knew, the only one who could completely heal an injury of the mind was his master and possibly Pestonya. Even though Sebas tried to get the girl to rest, she hurriedly opened her mouth. "From… now on?"

Sebas briefly hesitated over whether it was alright to keep conversing like this. But since the person in question wished to talk, he decided to continue the conversation while keeping a close eye on her condition. "You would no doubt be too nervous to remain in the capital. Do you have a place that you can trust?" The girl lowered her face. "I see…" He did not bother to state the obvious. She did not. *This has become quite troublesome.*

However, it was not as if they had to take action immediately. The man from before should not be caught any time soon, and it should take some time for the search to arrive at Sebas. Although that may just be wishful thinking, he wanted to believe that there was no reason to panic. At the very least, not until the girl regained her health.

"Then, let's see. First, could you tell me your name?"

"Ah… I'm… Ts… Tsuare."

"Tsuare, then. Ah, I still have not given my name. My name is Sebas Tian, please call me Sebas. I serve the master of this mansion, Lady Solution."

That was their setting. Although Solution wore the white dress instead of the usual maid uniform in case of sudden visitors, while the girl was here, it would be necessary that he have her maintain the role of the master.

"So…lu… sama."

"Yes. Solution Epsilon-sama. But I do not think that you will have that many opportunities to see her."

"…?"

"She is quite picky." As if to indicate that he could say no more, Sebas closed his mouth. And after a brief moment of silence had passed, he spoke. "Now, rest for today. We can save the discussion for what you will do next for tomorrow."

"Yes…"

After confirming that Tsuare had laid down on the bed, Sebas picked up the bowl that had carried the stew and left the room. When he opened the door, as expected, Solution stood outside. Although it was most likely to eavesdrop, Sebas did not go out of his way to admonish her.

Solution as well, she showed no signs that the possibility she could be scolded even existed. That was why she simply stood outside without hiding her presence or her body. If she truly wanted to hide, as an assassin class, she would have concealed herself more skillfully.

"What is it?"

"…Sebas-sama. In the end, what will you do with that?" Sebas directed his senses to the door behind him. Even if it was shut tight, it did not block out sound completely. Some of what is said here would be overheard. Sebas walked on with Solution wordlessly following him from behind. He stopped where Tsuare would not be able to hear them. "…You are talking about Tsuare I see. For now, I am planning to make the decision tomorrow."

"A name…" She did not continue, but as if she made up her mind, Solution opened her mouth once more. "Although it may not be my place to say, there is a very high chance that that thing will become an obstacle. It needs to be disposed of as soon as possible."

What did she mean when she said dispose? Hearing Solution's heartless words, Sebas thought that it was to be expected. This was Nazarick— for one who served the 41 Supreme Beings, it was the soundest way of thinking when it came to those who did not belong with Nazarick. Sebas' actions were what was strange. "You are right. If she were to become an obstacle to Ainz-sama's orders, then she would have to be dealt with swiftly."

Solution looked at him strangely. It was a face that was asking why he had brought her if he already knew. "She may prove useful to us. Since I already picked her up, I need to think of a way to put her to good use rather than simply throwing her away."

"…Sebas-sama, I do not know your reasons for bringing that with you. However, those injuries mean that there are circumstances that followed. And I doubt that the ones who inflicted those injuries will look kindly on the fact that the thing is still alive."

"There will not be any problems on that front."

"…Do you mean that you've already taken care of them?"

"No, that's not it. Only that should it appear that there will be a problem, I will use a certain method. That is why I wish for us to maintain appearances until then. Do you understand, Solution?"

"…I will carry out your order." As Solution watched Sebas walk away, she suppressed the small anger rising within her. Having been told as much by Sebas, her immediate superior, she couldn't speak out against him despite her numerous complaints. And if no problems arose, then it would be of no consequence if the matter was overlooked. But even so—

"How could he use the property of Nazarick on the likes of a human…" Everything in the Great Tomb of Nazarick belonged to Ainz Ooal Gown and by extension, to the Supreme Beings. Could using them without permission be tolerated? No matter how much she thought it over, the answer did not come.

♦ ♦ ♦

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 9:48

Sebas opened the door to the residence. He was returning from his usual duty of visiting the Adventurer's Guild early in the morning to make note of the requests that had been put up before the adventurers could accept them. He recorded every piece of information on paper, even rumors circulating around town, and delivered all of them to Nazarick. Analyzing the contents proved quite difficult and was left to the sages in Nazarick. He passed through the door and stepped inside the residence. If this was a few days ago, Solution would have been there to greet him. However—

"Wel…come… back… Seba…-sama." Currently, that task was given to the muttering girl wearing a maid uniform that extended all the way down to her feet. The day after taking in Tsuare, they held a discussion and decided to have the girl work at the residence. Although they could have her stay as a guest, Tsuare was against it. She did not want to be treated as a guest on top of being given help. Even if it wouldn't be enough to repay them, at the very least, she wanted to work.

Sebas saw that the other side of her motive lied in her anxiety. In other words, she knew very well that her dangerous circumstances will soon bring a troublesome incident to this residence. She was trying her best to contribute so she would not be thrown away. Needless to say, Sebas had reassured Tsuare that he would never abandon her. If he was going to throw out someone who had nowhere else to go, he would never have brought her with him in the first place. However, it was also true that he was not convincing enough to heal the wounds of her heart. "I've returned, Tsuare. Were there any problems?"

Tsuare shook her head. Different from when they first met, the white brim on top of her neatly cut hair wobbled. "There… no… problems."

"I see, that's good." The atmosphere around her was still dark and her difficult expression remained unchanging. However, her voice sounded like it was gradually growing louder, as if the thing that was eating away at her body was becoming undone, little by little.

Then the only problem remaining would be… As Sebas walked onwards, Tsuare followed beside him. To walk next to the butler, Sebas— a direct superior, it was an unacceptable behavior for a maid. But Tsuare would be ignorant of the maid etiquette, having never been educated as one. Sebas too, had no intention of teaching her that lifestyle.

"What is on the menu for today?"

“Yes. It’s…potato… stew.”

“I see. I am looking forward to it. Tsuare’s cooking is delicious, after all.” At the words that Sebas spoke with a smile, Tsuare grew bright red and lowered her face while squeezing her maid apron with both hands. “T-that’s…not… true.”

“No, no, of course it’s true. It’s quite fortunate since I cannot cook whatsoever. But are you fine with the ingredients? Please tell me if you are missing something or have something that you wish for me to buy.”

“Yes. I will… check… next time… and tell… you.” Although Tsuare could act normally in the house and with Sebas, she still showed an adverse reaction to the outside world. She could not handle any tasks that required her to leave the residence and as such, jobs like procuring ingredients fell to Sebas.

There was nothing lavish about Tsuare’s cooking. They were simple home-cooked meals. For this reason, they did not need expensive ingredients and the shopping could be taken care of quickly. Sebas as well, he was able to learn about many different ingredients and managed to acquire information on the foods of this world. He considered it killing two birds with one stone.

All of a sudden, Sebas proposed an idea. “…Shall we go buy them together?” Tsuare’s face showed great surprise. Then, growing scared, she shook her head. Her complexion turned for the worse and she began to sweat heavily. “No, I’m… kay.” Sebas thought it was to be expected and did not let it show on his face.

Ever since she started working, Tsuare never tried to do the tasks that required her to go outside. She locked up her terror by regarding this residence as the absolute castle walls that protected her. In other words, she was only able to move after drawing a line separating here and the outside—the world that hurt her.

However, at this rate Tsuare would never be able to step foot outside. And they could not hide her forever. Considering Tsuare’s mental condition, Sebas knew that it was cruel to tell her to go outside after only a few days. The safer option would be to give her more time so she could slowly adapt.

However, that was for when they actually had the time to spare. Sebas had no intention of settling down and spending the rest of his life in the capital. He would always be a stranger to this land, who was only here for information. If his master were to order that he withdraw…

In preparation for that day, he had to impart her with various possibilities while he still could. Sebas stopped and stared directly at Tsuare. She blushed and tried to lower her gaze but he covered her cheek with his hand and raised her face.

“Tsuare, I fully know that you are frightened. But be assured that I, Sebas, will protect you. I will destroy any harm that may come your way.”

”… …”

“Tsuare, place your foot forward. If you are scared, then I do not mind even if you have your eyes closed.”

"… …"

He grabbed Tsuare's hand while she still hesitated and spoke the words that he knew would be mean to her. "Do you not trust me, Tsuare?" As time dragged on, a curtain of silence hanged heavily over the hallway. Tsuare's eyes grew slightly wet as she parted her rosy lips, revealing her pearl-like front teeth.

"…Sebas-sama is un…fair. I can't refuse if you say it… like that."

"Please rest easy. Although I may not look it, I am quite strong. There are only a few apart from the 41 who are stronger than I."

"Is…that…a lot?" Tsuare giggled at the ambiguous number, believing it to be a joke to console her. Sebas simply chuckled and did not answer. Sebas continued his stride. Although he knew that Tsuare was stealing glances at his profile, he did not mention it. He knew that Tsuare held some tender feelings for him, one that could not quite be called love.

However, Sebas felt that those feelings were something that was indoctrinated into her, like a feeling of reliance for the benefactor who saved her from that hell. Sebas was also an old man and it was possible that Tsuare was mistaking familial love with the love between a man and a woman. And even if Tsuare truly loved Sebas, he had no intention of accepting her feelings. Not when he was hiding so much, not when their circumstances were so different.

"Then I will meet you after a few words with the lady."

"Lady… Solu…"

Tsuare's expression darkened slightly. Although Sebas knew why, he did not say it. Solution did not try to come in contact with Tsuare and when she did, would only give her a passing glance before leaving without a word. It was to be expected that being ignored to such a degree would create a feeling of anxiety and in Tsuare's case, great fear.

"It's alright. The lady has always been like that to everyone. She is not singling you out in particular… And I will only say it here, but the lady has quite a difficult personality, after all." As Sebas became overly talkative, the expression that was on Tsuare's face softened slightly. "She becomes sulky if she sees a cute child."

"…I'm… not… compared… to her." Tsuare hurriedly waved her two hands. Although it was true that Tsuare was pretty, she was still no match for Solution. However, what is beautiful and what is not was different for everyone.

"If I had to go by appearances, then Tsuare would be more my type than the lady."

"T-t-that's…!" As he gently looked at Tsuare's brightly lit face pointed towards her feet, his brows furrowed at her sudden change in expression. "And… my body… dirty…" Sebas breathed an inward sigh from seeing Tsuare's face make a complete change from before. He then spoke while staring ahead. "Jewels are like that. Those without scratches are considered beautiful and valuable." Hearing his words, Tsuare's expression darkened in an instant.

"However— humans are not jewels." It looked as if Tsuare slightly raised her face. "It seems that Tsuare wishes to keep telling herself that she is dirty. But wherein lies a human's beauty? For a jewel, it can be appraised with certainty. But the beauty of a human— what is the standard? Is it the average? The general consensus? If so, would the minority opinion be considered meaningless?"

After a brief pause, Sebas continued. "Like how people have their own definition of what they consider beautiful, 'I' believe that if a person's beauty lies separate from their appearance, it is not in their past, but their heart. Although I do not know all of your history, from what I have sensed of your inner self for these past few days spent with you, I do not consider you dirty in the slightest."

Sebas closed his mouth and the world changed to one where the only sound was of their footsteps. In the midst of it, Tsuare spoke with determination. "…If you say I'm… beautiful… then please… hug…" Sebas did not let her finish and embraced her. "You are beautiful." As he spoke gently, silent tears flowed out of Tsuare's eyes. Sebas softly patted her back as to console her and slowly parted.

"Tsuare, my apologies. The lady calls."

"O-okay…."

With a sad goodbye from Tsuare and her red eyes, Sebas knocked on the door and opened it without even waiting for a response. As he closed the door behind him, he gave Tsuare who was still glancing at him a smile. Because the house was rented, despite having many rooms, there was barely any furniture. However, this room was decorated enough to not be embarrassed when accepting guests. But a person with a discerning eye would be able to recognize the lack of history and the shallowness of the room.

"Milady, I have just returned."

"…Good work, Sebas."

The fake master of the residence sat on a lengthy sofa while wearing a bored expression. In reality, that expression was an act. Because of the presence of the outsider named Tsuare, she was donning the foolish mask of a proud lady. Solution moved her gaze from Sebas to the door.

"…She's left."

"It seems that way." While scanning each other's faces, like usual, Solution was the first to open her mouth. "When will you drive her out?" This was what Solution asked every time they met. And like every time, Sebas gave the same reply. "When the time comes." If it were like usual, the conversation would have been finished. Solution would sigh and that would have been it.

However, today, Solution did not seem to want to leave it at that and continued. "…Could you clearly explain when this time you speak of will be? There is no guarantee that hiding that human will not lead to a troublesome incident. Will that not interfere with Ainz-sama's will?"

"There still has not been any incidents thus far. …To think that you would panic because you fear what some humans might do, that is not appropriate behavior for one who serves Ainz-sama."

A silence permeated between them and Sebas breathed a small sigh. This was a very dangerous situation. Although there was no emotion on Solution's face, Sebas could feel that she was angry with him. Even if this residence was only a base of operations, Solution still considered it as a branch of the Great Tomb of Nazarick. She could not condone the presence of a human that did not have the master's permission.

Solution did not try to attack Tsuare thus far because Sebas was firmly keeping her in check. However, if this continued, it would become impossible for him to control her in the near future. Sebas dwelled on the fact that he was running out of time. "…Sebas-sama. If that human becomes an obstacle to Ainz-sama's orders then—"

"She will be disposed of." Sebas assured her as to not let her finish the rest of her words. Solution closed her mouth and stared at Sebas with unreadable eyes, then bowed her head.

"Then I have nothing else that needs to be said. Sebas-sama, please don't forget your words just now."

"Of course, Solution."

"…However." The emotion in Solution's mutter was strong enough to stop Sebas in his tracks. "…However, Sebas-sama. Is it alright to not report to Ainz-sama? About that thing."

Sebas fell silent for a few seconds, and then replied. "There will not be any problems. It would be discourteous to rob Ainz-sama of his time for one human."

"…Entoma and the others should be communicating with you via 'Message' daily at the appointed time. Could you not simply say a few words on the matter then? …Are you intentionally hiding it?"

"Of course not. I would not do something like that to Ainz-sa—"

"Then… you are not acting out of your own self-interest?"

The air became tense. Sebas realized that Solution had slightly readied herself into a stance. He understood just how dangerous of a position he was in. Every member of Nazarick pledged absolute loyalty to 'Ainz Ooal Gown' — and by extension, the Supreme Beings. With the Guardians at the helm, it would not be an exaggeration to say that every single member was in agreement of that creed. Even the assistant butler, Éclair, who wants to conquer Nazarick for his own, was loyal to the 41 Supreme Beings and regarded them with respect.

Needless to say, Sebas was one of them. However, he still believed that it was wrong to cast out a pitiable existence because of mere possibilities. Although with that said, he also knew very well that the majority of Nazarick would not agree with him. No, he thought he knew. Solution's reaction revealed just how shallow his understanding had been.

Solution was serious. She was prepared to meet Sebas the butler— in other words, her superior in regards to the daily workings of Nazarick and one of the strongest in close combat, with force depending on his answer. He had no idea that Solution was prepared to go that far to erase the problem.

Sebas showed a smile. From his smile, Solution's eyes looked at him strangely. "…Of course not. The reason I am not reporting this to Ainz-sama is not because of my own selfishness."

"Then can you show the basis for your actions?"

"I hold her cooking skill in high regard."

"Cooking… you say?"

It looked as if question marks were hovering over Solution's head.

"Indeed. And would it not appear strange to others if there were only two people living in this large mansion?"

"…That is possible." Solution had no choice but to concede on that point. Not having servants while living a life of luxury in a large residence would definitely appear odd.

"I feel that at the very least, we should have one at least one servant with us. If we were to invite guests to the house, would it not be suspicious if we cannot even serve them a meal?

"…In other words, you are using that human as a part of our disguise?"

"That's right."

"But there is no need for it to be that human specifically."

"Tsuare feels indebted to me. That means she would never leak information even if she feels endangered. Am I wrong?"

Very briefly, Solution thought it over, nodding soon after. "You are right."

"That's how it is. There should be no need to ask for Ainz-sama's permission if the matter is only regarding our cover. Not only that, he may even become angry and tell us to handle such matters on our own." Sebas quietly asked Solution, who was remaining silent. "Do you understand now?"

"…Yes."

"Then this should be enough for no—." Sebas cut his words short. He had heard a sound, like two hard objects colliding with one another. It was so subtle that anyone but Sebas might have missed it. The erratic repetition of the noise confirmed that someone was doing it on purpose. Sebas opened the door to the room and focused his senses toward the end of the hallway.

They both froze, realizing that the sound came from the knocker at the front door. Since they first arrived in the Kingdom, no one had ever knocked on that door. Any dealings they had were always done outside and invited no one to their residence. It was a desperate measure to prevent others from finding out that only two people were living in this large mansion.

But today, they had visitors. It would be more than enough to cause a troublesome incident. Sebas left Solution in the room and walked up to the entrance. He opened the cover of the prop-up

window attached to the front door. What he saw through the hole was a man with wide shoulders surrounded on both sides by the Kingdom's soldiers.

The man with the wide shoulders was dressed decently well. On his chest, he wore a heavy crest that shone with the glint of copper metal. The healthy complexion of his face was padded with blubber and he was remarkably fat, perhaps due to his eating habits.

And lastly— there was a man who seemed different from the rest. His skin was pale, like it had never been exposed to sunlight. With sharp eyes and gaunt cheeks, he looked like a bird of prey— like the scavengers that ravaged rotten carcasses. His black clothes hung loosely on him, making it obvious that he was hiding weapons.

What irritated Sebas' sixth sense was the air of blood and grudges that hovered around him. They were truly a mismatched group lacking cohesion. Sebas could not determine their identity or their objective.

"…Who is it?"

"I am patrol officer Stafan Hevish." The plump man at the very front spoke in a high pitched voice and revealed his name. He was a patrol officer, a civil servant tasked with keeping public order. A position similar to the boss of the normal patrols that made their rounds around the city, their duties included a wide range of categories. Because of this, Sebas could not predict why this man named Stafan had decided to pay a visit and became troubled.

Ignoring Sebas, Stafan continued to speak. "The Kingdom has a law that bans the buying and selling of slaves. It was spearheaded by Princess Renner who drew up the plans which allowed it to pass. We received a report that the people of this residence may be holding this law in contempt and came to investigate."

He then finished by asking if he could step inside. Although Sebas thought of various words of rejection, denying them entry could escalate into a bigger problem. There was also no guarantee that Stafan was a real civil servant. Despite the fact that the Kingdom's civil servants did indeed wear the same crest as the one on Stafan's chest. However, that still was not an absolute guarantee. There was still a chance — although it was a great crime — that it was a forgery.

With that said, allowing a few humans into the residence would not pose too big of a problem. If it came to blows, then Sebas could easily take care of it. In fact, it would better if they were imposters. Gleaning something from the silence that formed while Sebas was thinking, Stafan opened his mouth a second time.

"May I speak to the master of this residence? Of course, if the master is not present then it can't be helped. But I don't think investigators going back empty-handed will be a favorable outcome." Stafan smiled with a face that did not carry even a hint of apology. Hidden behind that expression was a threat backed by the power of the law.

"Before that, I have something I'd like to ask you. Who is the man standing behind you?"

"Hmm? His name is Succulent. He's a representative of the store that filed the report."

“My name is Succulent. Pleasure making your acquaintance.” Seeing the faint smile on Succulent’s face, Sebas understood that he had lost. His smile was that of a cruel hunter mocking his prey for falling into his trap. It was safe to assume that he had come after perfect preparations. In that sense, there was a good chance that Stafan was indeed a real civil servant. He most likely also had a plan prepared should Sebas refuse them. Then at the very least, Sebas had to try and figure out the opponent’s intentions.

“…I understand. I will deliver the news to the lady. Please wait there for a while.”

“Of course, we’ll wait.”

“But please make it quick. We don’t have the leisure of dallying.”

Succulent smiled and Stafan shrugged his shoulders.

“Understood. Then if you will excuse me.” Sebas closed the cover and turned in the direction of Solution’s room. But before that, he would have to tell Tsuare to go hide deeper inside. With the soldiers left out by the door, the two people who were guided inside— Stafan and Succulent each wore an astonished face from seeing Solution.

They had not expected to meet such a beauty. Stafan’s expression slowly loosened and his eyes traveled back and forth between her face and chest. He swallowed his saliva, eyes filling with lust. On the other hand, Succulent’s face gradually grew hard. To Sebas, it became obvious who he needed to be vigilant of. He offered the two the sofa opposite from Solution.

Solution who was already sitting and Stafan, who was just seated, Succulent introduced them. “So, just what exactly is going on?” At Solution’s question, Stafan faked a cough as he spoke. “According to a report from a certain store, apparently, a certain individual dragged away their employee. As he did so, the individual unduly handed over money to a different employee. Buying slaves is outlawed in our country… Don’t you think that what this person did was illegal?”

Stafan’s shoulders grew increasingly tense, as if he was slowly becoming angry. Solution replied in a bored voice. “Is that so?” The attitude behind her response left the two men blinking. Although they were applying pressure, her behavior was completely unexpected. “I leave all complicated matters to Sebas. Sebas, take care of the rest.”

“A-are you fine with that? Depending on how it turns out, you may be branded as a criminal.”

“My, how scary. Sebas, if it seems likely that I will become a criminal then do tell me. Then everyone, I bid you well.”

Solution said her goodbyes and left them with a bright smile. No one could say anything to her as she left the room. The power of a beauty’s smile was confirmed in that moment. Before the sound of the door closing could ring out, they heard the astonished voices of the soldiers from seeing Solution.

“…Then I will listen to what you have to say in her place.” Sebas smiled and took a seat in front of the two men. Stafan’s behavior was awkward, still entranced by her smile. However, as if to cover for him, Succulent broke in.

"Alright, then mind if I ask you some questions? Like you've heard from Hevish–sama at the entrance, our… well, our employee has gone missing, you see. I interrogated a certain someone and he says that he handed her over after receiving money. Though I don't even want to imagine one of our employees doing something like that, I had no choice but to call the authorities."

"That's right. A dirty crime like slave trading will not be tolerated!" He slammed down on the table. "That's why Succulent-kun here who called it in without fearing the store's bad reputation spreading is quite the exemplary citizen!"

"Thank you, Hevish-sama." Succulent lowered his head to Stafan, who was speaking with such enthusiasm that he was spitting at the mouth.

What is with these theatrics? Thinking so in his head, Sebas began to ponder. The two men in front of him were definitely working together. Then without a doubt, they made thorough preparations before commencing their attack. As such, his defeat was certain. The question then was how to minimize his losses.

And on the flip side, what was Sebas' condition to emerge victorious in this situation? The victory condition for Nazarick's butler, Sebas, was to solve this problem without drawing further attention. It was not to protect Tsuare. However—

"I suspect that the man who claims to have received money could be lying. Where is he now?"

"He's been arrested for dealing in slavery and is currently locked up in a cell. And the result from his testimony and our careful investigation is—"

"That the one who purchased our employee is you, Sebas-san."

It meant that the man was caught and had confessed to everything. There was a good chance that he was pressured to change his testimony so that it would benefit them. Sebas was torn between whether to feign ignorance, lie, or deny it outright. What if he said that she wasn't in the residence? What if he said that he killed her? Countless ideas ran through his mind but the possibility of them working was low. They would not retreat so easily. Though before that, he had to know one thing.

"But how did you come to the conclusion that it was me? Where is your proof?" That was the part Sebas could not figure out. As long as he did not leave behind anything that would reveal his name or identity, there should not have been any evidence. Then how did they figure out this location? He was always careful of being followed whenever he was outside. He had trouble believing that someone who could tail him without him noticing existed in this city.

"The scroll." A flash ran through Sebas' mind. The scroll that he bought from the Magician's guild. That scroll was definitely different from others in its impressive craftwork. Someone who knew what they looked like would recognize that his scroll was bought from the Magician's guild. Then they could trace his steps and glean something out of it. A person dressed as a butler while carrying a scroll would be that much more conspicuous.

But even so, that still was not enough evidence to place Tsuare in this residence. He could argue that it was just someone who looked similar. The problem would be that things would get more

complicated if they were to search the mansion. That's right. They would be forced to admit that including Tsuare, only three people were living in this large mansion. Sebas resigned himself. "…It's true that I brought the girl here with me. However, at that time the girl was severely injured and on the verge of death. I had no choice but to take her."

"Then you admit that the girl traded hands through money?"

"In other words you admit that you used money to trade for the girl?"

"Before that, may I speak with the man you arrested?"

"Unfortunately that will not be possible. We can't have you two matching your stories."

"Then—"

I do not mind if you listen to our conversation. As he was about to say so, Sebas closed his mouth. In the end, this was a race that had been planned beforehand. There was little chance that the situation would improve even if he were to go to where the man was. Going on the offensive from this angle would only be a waste of time.

"…Then are you admitting to the fact that the girl was indeed a victim of those horrible injuries? From the government's perspective, I feel that this would be considered worse—"

"The work in our shop is pretty difficult. It can't be helped if she were to get injured. You see that often with the mines and such, it's the same."

"…I do not think that the injuries you are talking about and hers are the same."

"Hahaha, it's the entertainment business but we get a lot of different customers. We try to be careful though. Well, I understand Sebas-san's point. We will be a little— yes, a little more careful."

"…A little?"

"Well, yes. Anymore and it costs money, here and there." At Sebas' question, Succulent wore a mocking smile, the kind where only the corners of the lips curl upwards. Sebas too, responded with a smile.

"Enough." Stafan sighed deeply, like he was dealing with an idiot. "My duty is to check whether or not there was a transaction involving slaves. Checking on how workers are treated is for someone else. It seems that this incident was not connected to slavery."

"…Then could you tell me the name of the civil servant who is in charge of the working conditions?"

"…Hmm, I'd like to tell you but it's complicated. Unfortunately, someone who interferes with another's work isn't very popular."

"…Then please wait until then."

Stafan grinned, as if he was waiting for those words. "…I wish I could do that, I really do. But since the report has already been made, I have to arrest you people and investigate as soon as possible, by force if necessary." In other words, he had no time.

"Even now, looking at the circumstantial evidence, it's obvious that you're guilty. But the store wants to resolve the matter cleanly. Of course, there will have to be compensation depending on the agreement. And it'll also be a little costly to destroy the false written report about the slave trading."

"What is the breakdown, exactly?"

"Well, you see, we're going to need you to return our employee to us along with compensation for the profit loss during the time she was away."

"I see, and how much would that be?"

"In gold coins… let's see here. Well, I'll give you a discount, a 100 gold pieces and an additional 300 for compensation, making it 400 in total. How's that?"

"…Quite a fortune, how is that broken up? What type of work does she do on a given day? How much of it?"

At that moment, Stafan interrupted him.

"Ah, wait a moment. That shouldn't be all of it, Succulent-kun."

"Quite so, I almost forgot. You mentioned that since a report has been filed, destroying the entry will require a fee even if we reach a settlement."

"Of course, Succulent-kun. You can't forget that part." Stafan grinned. "…But."

"Hmm?"

"No, it's nothing." Sebas swallowed his words and smiled. Succulent bowed his head to Stafan and continued his talk.

"Hmm, I apologize for that, Hevish-sama. Anyways, the fee will be a third of the compensation so a 100 pieces. In total, that will come out to 500 pieces."

"I paid money back when I brought her here, is that part included as well?"

"What are you saying? Listen here, from the moment you agreed, you never bought a slave. In other words, the money involved in that transaction never existed. You probably dropped it somewhere."

Did he expect Sebas to simply pretend that he dropped a hundred gold pieces? Well, they most likely already each took half.

"…However, the girl's body still has not healed completely. If you try to take her with you now, she may suffer a relapse. There is also a chance that she may lose her life in the treatments to follow. I believe that it will be safer for her stay with us for the time being."

Succulent's eyes glinted oddly. Noticing his change, Sebas knew that he had made a mistake. He had revealed that Tsuare was important to him.

"Of course, of course, you're right. If she died then you would obviously have to recompense us, then how about you lend us the lady of this house until her treatment is finished?"

"Ohhh! That's a splendid idea. It goes without saying he should plug up the hole that he's responsible for!"

The smile covering Stafan's face was clearly filled with lust. He was probably already undressing Solution in his mind. Sebas' smile disappeared and his face became expressionless. Although Succulent was probably joking, he will no doubt push for that idea if Sebas were to show a weak spot. From the moment that the fact he valued Tsuare was revealed, the possibility that this troublesome incident will grow bigger in the future was right before his eyes.

"…Won't excessive greed lead to trouble?"

"Ridiculous!" Stafan's face became dyed red as he shouted loudly.

Like a pig to the slaughter. Thinking so in his head, Sebas wordlessly watched Stafan.

"What do you mean greedy?! This is all born from my heart that only wishes to safeguard the law as established by the esteemed Princess Renner! How dare you be so disrespectful!"

"Now, now, calm down, Hevish-sama." As soon as Succulent intervened, the screaming Stafan immediately controlled his temper. That sudden change suggested that his previous anger was not genuine, only a ploy to appear more threatening. *Even your acting is clumsy.* Sebas thought so in his head.

"But still, Succulent-kun…"

"Hevish-sama, since we already said everything that we came here to say, how about we come back in two days to hear his reply? Will that be fine, Sebas-san?"

"Yes, I understand." With that, the discussion was over. Sebas saw them out to the entrance. As the last to leave, Succulent smiled and said a few words to Sebas. "But I should really thank that prostitute. I never expected for a merchandise that was about to be scrapped to lay this big of a golden egg… or so a certain someone says."

Leaving those words behind, the door closed shut with a loud bang. Sebas continued to stare at the door, as if it was invisible. His face was calm, not showing any emotion in particular. However, something was clearly present deep within his pupils. He was angry.

No, such a vague word did not accurately describe what he was feeling. Fury, wrath, they would be more fitting. The reason Succulent showed his true intentions as he left was because he had

blocked off all avenues of escape, because Sebas had no way to respond— his own victory was certain.

"Solution, show yourself." In response to his voice, Solution emerged like water oozing out of shadow. She had used a skill from her assassin class to melt into the shadows. "I assume that you heard our discussion." Sebas' words were merely a confirmation. Solution nodded her head, as if it didn't even need to be said.

"So what are you planning to do, Sebas-sama?" He couldn't answer her question immediately. His lack of a reply drew an obviously cold gaze from Solution. "…Will you hand over the human and be done with the matter?"

"I doubt that the problem will be solved that way."

"…Is that so?"

"If we show a weakness then they will come for more. They belong to that sort. The problem will not be solved even if we were to hand Tsuare over to them. The bigger problem is how much information they gleaned from investigating us. Although we came to the capital disguised as merchants, if they dig deeper and find a blind spot— they will know that our identities are fake."

"Then what do you plan to do?"

"I do not know. I will go outside for a walk and think it over."

Sebas opened the front door and stepped outside.

Solution silently watched Sebas as his back grew smaller in the distance. *Absurd.* If he had not brought that human with him, this series of incidents would never have occurred. With that said, that was all in the past. What was important was what to do from here on out.

As Sebas' subordinate, she should not act arbitrarily while ignoring the words of her superior. However, it seemed that doing nothing and leaving the situation as is would be more dangerous. *If our youngest was here… if we moved as Pleiades, then we wouldn't have a problem…* She hesitated. She hesitated to the point where even she herself thought it was excessive. Finally, she found her determination and opened her left hand.

A scroll jumped out of her hand, as if it were rising to the surface. It was a scroll that she had been storing in her body until now. Currently, thanks to Demiurge's efforts, the day when mass production of low rank scrolls would become possible was nearly at hand. However, that was not the case back when Solution had been deployed and as such, this 'Message' scroll was given to her to be used only for emergencies. Solution had decided that the current situation required it.

She opened the scroll and activated the magic contained within. Now used up, the scroll crumbled to ash and completely vanished by the time it touched the ground. In sync with the activation of the magic, Solution felt something like a string connecting her with her target and brought out her voice. "Ainz-sama?"

『 Is this— Solution? What is it? Seeing how you were the one to contact me, is it an emergency? 』

“Yes.” For an instant, Solution fell silent. That time was born from her thinking of her loyalty to Sebas, considering the possibility that it was all her misunderstanding. However, her loyalty to Ainz was stronger than everything. And although they were to always act in the interests of Nazarick, of the 41 Supreme Beings, it could be said that Sebas’ current situation ignored this creed. For this reason, she opened her mouth to hear the judgment of her master.

“There is a chance that Sebas-sama has betrayed us.”

『Huh? …Ehhhh?! …Wait, no way… Hrrmph… Enough with your jokes, Solution. To utter such words without proof is inexcusable… …You have proof? 』

“Yes. Although it is not enough to be called proof—”

4章 集う男たち

Chapter 4: Congregated Men

Part 1

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 4:01

As soon as he entered Gazef's residence, the fatigue that had built up in his body hit him all at once and Brain spent almost the entire day asleep. When he awoke, he ate a light meal and again, fell back into sleep. Although he didn't want to admit it, the reason he could get this much rest in Gazef's home was because of the sense of security. Even if he knew that Gazef would be no match for Shalltear, his old enemy's home, which he considered to be the safest place in the world, gave Brain peace of mind and allowed him to rest.

The light shining through the shutters fell on Brain's face. The sunlight seeped into his eyelids and woke him from his deep, dreamless slumber. He opened his eyes and closed them again due to the blinding sunlight, blocking a sliver with his hand. Brain sat up and scanned his surroundings like a mouse. The simple room contained only the bare necessities. His equipment was lying in a corner of the room.

"This is the guestroom of the Kingdom's Warrior-Captain?" With a sigh of relief, Brain spoke with sarcasm as he stretched. With a cracking noise, his stiff body loosened as his blood circulation returned. He let out a large yawn. "…That guy probably lets his soldiers sleep here from time to time. Won't they be disappointed with a house like this?"

The reason the nobles lived extravagant lives wasn't solely due to their love of luxury. It was to show off and keep up appearances. Likewise, if their leader was surrounded in luxurious furnishings, it would stoke the ambitions of the soldiers and make them work harder.

"…No, that's just pointless meddling." Brain muttered and snorted back a laugh, not at Gazef, but at himself. For it was now the second time that his heart found comfort after a shock large enough to drive him to despair. It must be, since he had the peace of mind for such trivial thoughts. Brain thought of the appearance of that powerful monster and could not stop his hands from trembling.

"As expected…" He could not shed the terror in his heart. Shalltear Bloodfallen. Brain Unglaus, a man who gave his all to the sword, could not even reach her feet. She was an existence of absolute strength, a monster among monsters with an appearance as if all the beauty of this world was concentrated in one place. She was a being that possessed true power.

Just imagining it felt as if terror was piercing his entire body. Ensnared by the fear of that monster chasing him, he fled all the way to the capital with almost no sleep or rest. The fear of Shalltear appearing before him while he slept, of her clawing through the darkness as he ran on the road… he was dominated by that uneasiness and moved without getting a decent night of sleep.

Although the reason he fled to the capital was because he hoped that a place with many people would allow him to hide amongst them, even he himself did not expect that the terrifying ordeal of his escape would exhaust his mind to the point where he would seek his own death."

It could also be said that his meeting with Gazef was also outside of his expectations. Perhaps the small hope that Gazef would be able to do something for him caused Brain to subconsciously turn his feet in his direction. The answer was unknown.

"What am I to do now…" There was nothing. In his open hand, there was nothing. He turned his eyes to his equipment resting in the corner of the room. The katana that he obtained to defeat Gazef Stronoff, but what good would it do even if he were to beat him? With the knowledge of an existence that was tremendously more powerful than he, what meaning was there in their insignificant bickering?

"Maybe I should work the fields… at least that might still mean something." As he laughed bitterly at himself, Brain felt someone's presence standing outside the door. "Unglaus, I see you're awake." The voice belonged to the master of the house. "Yeah, I'm up, Stronoff." The door opened and Gazef stepped inside. He was securely wearing his equipment. "You were sleeping quite well. I was surprised."

"Yeah, thanks to you. Sorry."

"Don't mind it. But I must now be off for the palace. Tell me what happened to you when I return."

"…It's a gruesome story. You might end up like me."

"Still, I have to hear it. Perhaps a drink will make it easier to listen… Until then, treat this as your own home and make yourself comfortable. For meals or anything else you may need, ask the house servants and it will be prepared. And if you wish to go into the city… do you have money?"

"…I don't… but if need be I'll just sell the item on my hand." Brain lifted his hand wearing the ring to better show Gazef. "Are you fine with that? It looks quite expensive."

"Whatever." Originally, this item was also something he obtained in order to defeat Gazef. Now that he realized that it was for naught, would there be any reason to treasure it?

"It may be difficult to sell expensive items and it also takes time for the purchase price to be prepared. Take this with you." Gazef tossed a small pouch. The clinking sound of metal rang out from the pouch that landed in Brain's hand. "…Sorry. I'll be borrowing this for a bit then."

Part 2

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 10:31

Sebas walked while thinking of how to deal with the five people who were tailing him after he left the residence. He had no particular destination in mind. He only believed that moving his body and a change of scenery would help him think of a good idea. Eventually, he found that a crowd had formed up ahead.

There, a voice that sounded like both anger and laughter rang out, along with the sound of something being beaten. In the crowd, people were remarking about how someone was going to be killed, and that someone should call the guards. Although he couldn't see past the crowd, some kind of violence was certainly occurring. Sebas thought about taking a different road, but just as

he was about to change his direction, he hesitated… and continued forward. He was heading towards the midst of the crowd.

"Pardon." With that single phrase, Sebas moved between the crowds and stepped inside. As if they were in awe of the strange movements of the old man who was slipping through, everyone who was in Sebas' path shrank away from him as he passed by. It seemed like there was another person aside from Sebas trying to make his way deeper into the crowd. From his voice asking to let him pass, he sounded flustered from being unable to go through.

Having arrived at the center of the crowd without much difficulty, Sebas confirmed with his own eyes what was going on. Several men in ragged clothes were kicking something all at once. Sebas wordlessly continued on. He approached the men till he was close enough to stretch out his hand and touch them.

"What's with this old man?!" One of the five men there spotted Sebas and asked roughly. "I thought it was a bit noisy."

"You want to be taught a lesson too?" The men moved to surround Sebas, revealing the thing they were kicking. It was a boy. Whether it was from the mouth or the nose, blood flowed from his face as the boy lay sprawled out. He was unconscious from being kicked for a long time but was still breathing.

Sebas gazed at the men. The smell of alcohol hung in the air around them, as well as from their breaths. Their faces were dyed red and it was not from exercise. Perhaps they could not control their violence because they were drunk. Sebas spoke to them with a blank expression. "Though I do not know your reasons, I believe you have done enough."

"Ahn? He dirtied my clothes with his food. I'm supposed to just let that go?" At the place the man was pointing to, there was indeed a slight smudge. However, their clothes were dirty from the beginning. Looking at it that way, the spot wasn't even that noticeable. Sebas turned his eyes to the one who looked to be the leader among the group. Although the difference was indistinguishable, almost impossible to notice for a human, Sebas could perceive it with his outstanding senses as a warrior.

"Truly… this city has terrible public order."

"Ahn?"

From his remark that seemed to be confirming something far off in the distance, one of the men felt that he was ignoring them and let out a voice filled with anger. "…Get out of my sight."

"What? Gramps, what did you just say?"

"I will tell you one more time. Get out of my sight."

"You bastard!" The face of the man who appeared to be their leader became dyed red. He raised his fist to strike and— collapsed. Voices of surprise rang out from every direction, and of course, from the four remaining men as well.

What Sebas did was simple. He used his fist to hit the man's chin with pinpoint accuracy — at a breakneck speed barely visible to the human eye — and rattled the man's brain in his skull. Although he could have blown him away with a speed indiscernible to the human eye, but he would not be able to instill fear in the others. That was why he restrained his strength.

"Will you continue?" Sebas asked quietly. As if his calmness and strength rendered them sober, the men retreated a few steps while collectively apologizing. Sebas thought that the one they should be apologizing to was someone else but did not express it. Sebas turned his eyes away from the men as they helped their comrade up from the ground. He then tried to approach the boy but halted midway.

What was he doing? Right now, he had his own problem that needed to be taken care of immediately. But he was trying to shoulder yet another burden. How foolish. When it came down to it, were these not precisely the types of thoughtless actions and kindness the reasons why he was in such a mess in the first place?

The boy was saved; he had to be satisfied with just that. Despite such thoughts, Sebas approached the boy who was lying on the ground. He lightly touched the boy's back and poured in his Ki. A complete recovery would be simple if he were to use his full strength, but that would be exceedingly conspicuous. Having decided that he should stop at just the bare minimum, Sebas motioned towards the person who happened to be in his vision.

"…Please take this child to the temple. It's possible that his ribs are broken. Be wary of this and please carry him carefully on a board so that he does not move around too much." Seeing the man he gave the instructions to nod his head, Sebas moved on. There was no need for him to squeeze through the crowds. Wherever he walked, the crowd parted before him.

As Sebas was about to be on his way, he sensed that the number of people following him had increased. However, there was a problem. It was the identities of the new followers. The five who were tailing him from the residence were without a doubt, Succulent's men. Then just who were the two people who began following him after the incident with the boy? By their stride and the sound of their footsteps, they seemed to be adult men. But he could not guess as to whom.

"Thinking about it will not yield an answer. Then I should first… capture them." Sebas made a turn on the road and walked deeper and deeper into the darkness. Still, he was being followed. "…It makes me wonder if they really have any intention of hiding themselves."

They showed no signs of hiding the sound of their footsteps. Sebas wondered whether it was because they were not skilled enough to do so, or if there was a different reason. Regardless, he could just confirm it for himself. As the presence of passersby grew faint, Sebas was about to make his move when — as if matching his timing — the voice of a man still young flowed from one of the followers.

"Excuse me."

Part 3

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 10:27

On his way back to the palace, Climb was lost in thought as he moved his feet. In his head, he thought of the bout with Gazef and repeatedly imagined how the fight could have gone better. As he was deciding which moves to try if he were to get another chance, a shout rang out. A crowd had gathered. Two soldiers stood next to them and awkwardly looked on. Rowdy voices could be heard from the center of the crowd. By the sound, it did not bode well.

Climb's face hardened as he approached the soldiers. "What are you two doing?" From the sudden voice coming from behind them, the soldiers turned around and looked at Climb in surprise. They were equipped with a chain shirt and spear. They wore a surcoat bearing the Kingdom's coat of arms over their chain shirt.

Although they were the standard equipment for a guard, these two did not seem to be very well trained. For starters, their bodies seemed out of shape. They were not cleanly shaven and their chain shirts were poorly maintained and appeared dirty. As a whole, they gave off the air of a lack of discipline.

"Who the…" Seeing Climb who was younger than him speak to him out of the blue, the guard spoke in a confused voice with a hint of irritation. "I'm off duty." As Climb spoke firmly, the confusion that was in the guard's voice spread to his face. This boy who was younger than they were was speaking to them as if he were their superior. As if they judged that it would be wiser to be humble, the guards straightened their backs. "We think there's been some sort of a commotion."

Climb suppressed the urge to reprimand them that that much was obvious. Unlike the soldiers stationed in the palace, the guards who patrolled the surroundings were drawn from the common folk and did not receive much training. In other words, they were like civilians who learned how to swing a weapon. He turned his eyes away from the awkward guards and towards the crowd. Rather than relying on these two, it would be faster for him to act.

Although he might be overstepping his authority and interfering with the work of the patrols, if he were to ignore a citizen in need, then he would not be able to show his face to his benevolent master.

"You guys wait here." Without waiting for a reply, Climb tried to force his way through the crowd. Although there was some space, he could not pass through. No, if any human could pass through here that in itself would be strange. While he was trying to force his way in even as he was being pushed back, Climb heard a voice.

"…Get out of my sight."

"What?"

"I will tell you one more time. Get out of my sight."

"You bastard!"

This was bad. They were about to strike the old man. Climb's face was dyed red as he desperately tried to push his way inside. What entered his vision was the appearance of an old man and the men surrounding him. A ragged boy lay at the feet of the men.

The neatly dressed old man gave off an elegance that made him seem like nobility, or someone who served one. Each of the men surrounding him had a rough appearance and seemed to be drunk. It was obvious which side was in the wrong.

The largest among the men made a fist. When comparing him and the old man, the difference was overwhelming. The girth of their bodies, size of their muscles, the violent temperament that did not hesitate to spill blood; if he were to strike him, the old man would easily be sent flying. The people around them who realized this imagined the tragedy that was about to befall the old man and let out a small scream.

However, Climb who was in the middle of the crowd felt a small sense of danger. Without a doubt, the side with the men appeared tougher. But instead, he felt as if it was the old man who was giving off the atmosphere of absolute strength. That moment of absent-mindedness cost Climb the chance to stop the man's violence. He raised his fist and—

Collapsed. Voices filled with surprise came from Climb's surroundings. The old man had accurately struck the man's chin. Not only that, he did so with incredible speed. It was so quick that someone like Climb who trained their dynamic vision could only barely catch it.

"Will you continue?" Composure and skill that you could not tell from his outer appearance. Combined, they had no trouble sobering up the men from their drunken stupor. No, even the onlookers were becoming ensnared by the old man's energy. The men completely lost their will to fight.

"N-no, it was our fault." As they retreated back a few steps while apologizing in unison, the men grabbed their leader and fled. Climb had no intention of chasing after them. As if his heart had been stolen away by the old man with the straight back, Climb could not move. A posture that was as straight as a sword, it was an appearance that any warrior would long for.

The old man touched the boy's back as if to check his condition. He then asked a person nearby to treat him and moved on. The crowd parted in a straight line to make way for the old man. No one could tear their eyes away from his back, an appearance that commanded nothing less.

Climb quickly ran to the collapsed boy and took out the potion that he received from Gazef during training. "Can you drink?" There was no reply. He was completely unconscious. Climb opened the lid and poured the contents over the boy's body. Although it was easy to think of potions as medicine to drink, there was no problem in pouring it over the body. That was the greatness of magic.

The potion seeped into the boy's body, as if his skin was absorbing the fluid. Seeing that the boy's complexion regained its color, Climb felt relieved and nodded his head. The surrounding people saw Climb use an expensive item like a potion and were just as surprised as they were with the old man's skill. However, needless to say, Climb did not regret it.

As long as citizens paid taxes, it was the duty of those who lived off of those taxes to protect them and ensure their safety. Since he could not fulfill his duty, Climb felt that he had to do at least this much.

Although the potion should ensure that there would not be any more problems with the boy, it would be better to take him to the temple just in case. Climb signaled to the guards that he had on standby. It seemed they called for more; the two guards were joined by three more men.

The surrounding people looked at the guards that were arriving only just now with reproach. The guards looked nervous as Climb spoke to one of their men. “Take this child to the temple.”

“What happened here, exactly…”

“There was violence. I used a healing potion so there shouldn’t be any problems, but take him just in case.”

“Yes, understood!”

Leaving the guards to finish up, Climb judged that there was nothing more for him to do here. Nothing good will come of a soldier who worked in the palace meddling any further with the work of others.

“I assume you can find out what happened here from a witness who saw it from the beginning.”

“I will do as you say.” Having received their orders, the guards found their confidence and quickly moved out. Climb then stood up and ran, ignoring the voices of the guards asking where he was going.

Arriving at the bend in the road where the old man had turned, Climb slowed his pace. He then followed him. His eyes fell on the old man’s back walking ahead of him. Although he wanted to talk to him immediately, whenever he found the courage to do so, Climb lowered his face. It felt as if the pressure would overpower him— of the invisible, thick wall.

The old man turned this way and that and the paths grew darker. Climb followed him from behind without being able to say a word. This was the same as tailing him. Climb felt like pulling out his own hair from what he was doing. No matter how hard it was to speak to him, this wasn’t right. Climb tried looking at it as if the situation was reversed while following him.

Eventually, they turned into an alleyway with no one in sight. Climb took several deep breaths and, like a guy confessing to a girl he liked, squeezed out his courage and spoke. “—Excuse me.” In response to his voice, the old man turned.

Both his hair and beard were white, but his upright back reminded him of a sword forged in steel. The clear features of his face were lined with wrinkles and although they made him appear gentle, his eyes were sharp, like a hawk gazing at its prey. He even gave off the air of high nobility.

“What is it?” Although he could somewhat feel the old man’s age through his voice, it sounded imposing and was overflowing with life. Feeling an invisible pressure from his eyes, Climb gulped. “Uh, uh—” Climb was pushed back by the old man’s energy and could not speak. Then, the old man appeared to release the pent up energy building up inside him.

“Who are you?” His tone became gentle. Climb was finally released from the pressure and his throat could now move normally. “…My name is Climb, a soldier of this country. I’m here to give you my sincere thanks for doing what I should have done in my stead.” As Climb bowed low, the

old man narrowed his eyes as if he was thinking and muttered a quiet "Ahh" as if he finally understood what he meant.

"…Do not mind it. Well then." As the old man tried to end the conversation and walk away, Climb raised his face and asked. "Please wait a moment. Truthfully… though I'm embarrassed to admit it, I followed you. Actually, I don't mind even if you were to laugh at my forward request, but if it's okay with you, could you teach me that technique that you used a little while ago?"

"…What do you mean?"

"I am training to become stronger and wish to learn even a small portion of the incredible movement and technique you showed just a while ago." The old man scanned Climb from top to bottom. "Hmm… please show me both of your hands." Climb held out his hands and the old man stared at his palms with a piercing gaze. It felt somewhat awkward. The old man flipped Climb's hands over and scanned his fingernails, then nodded with satisfaction.

"They are thick and tough, good hands of a warrior." Hearing his words said with a smile, Climb felt his heart grow warm. He felt a joy similar to when Gazef complimented him. "No, someone like me is… insignificant as a warrior."

"I do not think that you need be so humble… may I ask you to show me your sword next?" The old man grasped the sword in his hand and stared at the blade with sharp eyes. "Aha… is this a reserve weapon?"

"How did you know?!"

"As I thought, do you see the chip in the blade here?" Looking at the place he was pointing to, there indeed was a slight crack in one side of the blade. He must have messed up his slash while training. "I've shown you something embarrassing!"

The shame made him want to disappear somewhere. Climb knew that he was inexperienced and was very cautious, even nervous, about the state of his weapon, all in an effort to increase his chance of victory by even the slightest amount. No, he thought he did until this very moment.

"I see. I have gotten a general sense of your personality. A warrior's hands and weapon are mirrors that reflect their wielder. You are a person who gives off quite an agreeable impression." Red up to his ears, Climb glanced up at the old man. It was a gentle, graceful smile. "I understand. I will give you a bit of training. However—"

As Climb was about to express his thanks, the old man stopped him and continued. "I have something that I would like to ask you. You did say that you are a soldier, correct? Actually, a few days ago I helped a certain lady…"

Having heard the whole story from the old man who introduced himself as Sebas, Climb felt an intense anger. The fact that someone was abusing the liberation of slaves proclaimed by Renner in such a way, realizing that even now, nothing has changed since then, he could not hide his fury. No, that wasn't it. Climb shook his head.

The slave market was banned by the laws of the kingdom. However, even if it wasn't slavery, it wasn't rare to hear about people having to work in poor environments due to debt. There were

plenty of those byways regarding that law. No, it was because of those byways that the law banning the slave market was able to be passed in the first place.

The law Renner had enacted was almost meaningless. Although that sad thought ran through his mind, he tossed it aside. What he had to think of now was Sebas' situation. Climb furrowed his brow. It was an overwhelmingly disadvantageous position. Although investigating the girl's work contract could allow them to retaliate, it was difficult to imagine that they would leave a weak spot like that in their preparations. If he appealed to the law, Sebas will definitely lose. The reason their opponent did not opt to settle it legally was because they judged that doing it their way would be more profitable.

"Do you know anyone who can stop corruption or lend us aid?" Climb knew of only one person, his master. He could say with confidence that there was no noble who was purer and could be trusted than Renner. However, he could not introduce her.

The ones who could do what they did would have various connections with powerful people. Without a doubt, the nobles they are friendly with will have significant authority. If the princess, who is part of the royalty faction, used her authority to order an investigation and rescue and it resulted in hurting the nobility faction, it could lead to a full scale conflict between the two groups.

Exercising power was not easy, especially in cases like the Kingdom where there was no guarantee that two large factions getting into a conflict would not lead to a civil war. Renner could not cause the collapse of the Kingdom. That was the reason why those topics came up in the discussion with Lakyus and her party. That was why Climb did not say anything. No, he could not say anything. Interpreting something from Climb's silence born from his troubles, Sebas muttered that he understood and told a shocking truth.

"…According to the girl, that place had many others besides her, regardless of gender."

Impossible. Despite not being run by the slave trade organization, a brothel like that exists? Or… maybe that's the brothel that they were talking about? Climb spoke. "If it was to only help them escape… I could ask my master. She possesses territory of her own so if they were to seek refuge there…"

"Is that possible? …And the girl could be sheltered as well?"

"…I apologize, Sebas-sama. I can't tell you for certain without asking my master. But my master is benevolent, that person will approve without a doubt!"

"Hoh. If your master is that reliable… must be quite an amazing person indeed." At Sebas' question, Climb nodded deeply. No one could be greater, he claimed. "Though this regards a different matter, what happens if there is evidence that the brothel is involved in the slave trade and thus breaking the law? Will that be covered up as well?"

"Although that's possible, if the evidence was given over to the appropriate hands… I want to believe that the Kingdom would not be so corrupt as to ignore it."

"…I understand. Then allow me to ask you a different a question. Why do you wish to be strong?"

“Eh?” At the sudden change in topic, Climb unwittingly made a strange noise. “A moment ago, you asked me to teach you my technique. Though I determined that you are someone who can be trusted, I wish to know the reason behind why you seek strength.”

Climb narrowed his eyes and Sebas’ question. Why did he want to be stronger? Climb was an abandoned child who did not know the faces of his parents. Stories like his were not uncommon in the Kingdom. Dying in the mud wasn’t uncommon either. Climb was also one of those whose fate was to die in the rain.

However… On that day, Climb met the sun. The existence that had been crawling in the dirt, in the darkness, was captivated by that light. When he was young, he longed for her. And as he grew up, his feelings changed shape without hesitation. It was love. He had to be rid of these feelings. The miracles that the wandering minstrels sang of would never happen in reality. Like how man cannot touch the sun, Climb’s wish would never be fulfilled. No, it must not be fulfilled.

The woman that Climb loved, her fate was to eventually be married to another. A princess could not be married to someone of an unknown birth like Climb, someone who was lower than a commoner. If the king was to die and the first prince succeeded the throne, Renner would immediately have to marry a high-ranking noble. It was likely that such talks were already underway between the prince and the high nobility. She may even be sent away to a neighboring kingdom as a tool for a political marriage.

Rather, despite being at a marriageable age, the fact that Renner did not even have a fiancé, let alone marry, was what was strange. To him, this moment in time was like gold. So much so that he would be willing to pay any price to be able to stop time. If he did not pour all of his time into his training, then he could enjoy that moment for even a tiny bit longer.

Climb was a simple, ordinary person with no talent. Even so, at the end of training, he had considerable skill when compared with the other soldiers. Then would it not be better to be satisfied and stop his training here so he can serve Renner by her side just a little while longer? However… was that truly enough? Climb yearned for the light of the sun. That was not a lie or a misunderstanding. It was a thought born from Climb’s honest truth. However—

“Because I’m a man.” Climb smiled. That’s right. Climb wanted to stand by her side. The sun shines brilliantly in the sky, a man could never stand next to it. Even so, he wanted to rise even higher so that he could become an existence that can be closer to the sun, no matter how marginal.

He did not wish to always remain as someone who had to raise his face to see her. This was the insignificant thoughts of a boy, but well suited for a boy nonetheless. He wanted to become a man who would suit the woman he yearned for, even if they could never be together.

These thoughts were why he was able to endure the life without comrades, the harsh training, and his studies that cut into his sleep time. If people wanted to call him foolish and mock him, then let them. Those who did not truly love another could never understand his feelings.

♦ ♦ ♦

Sebas narrowed his eyes as he observed his sincerity. As if he was trying to understand the myriad of meanings behind Climb’s short answer. He then nodded his head in satisfaction. “I have

decided how to train you from your reply." He stopped Climb as he was trying to express his gratitude.

"However, I am sorry to say that you have no talent. Training you in earnest will take quite some time, time that I do not have. I wish to train you so that the results will show quickly but… it will be very severe."

Climb gulped loudly. The glint in Sebas' eyes made his back shudder. The reason he didn't respond immediately was because he felt the power in those eyes. It was a strength that could not possibly exist, one exceeding even that of a serious Gazef.

"I will tell you honestly, you may die." This was not a joke. Climb's hunch told him that he was speaking the truth. He didn't care whether or not he died. However, that was only the case if it was for Renner. He did not want to lose his life over a selfish matter.

It wasn't because he grew scared. No, perhaps that really was the reason. Climb swallowed his saliva once and then hesitated. The surroundings were dominated by a brief silence, quiet enough to hear the noises in the distance. "Whether you survive is up to you… If you have something that you hold dear, a reason to crawl forward and cling onto your life, you will be fine."

Was he not going to teach him about martial arts? Despite such questions that rose to his mind, that was not the problem at hand. Understanding what Sebas' words meant, he accepted it and gave his reply. "I am prepared. I leave myself in your care."

"Do you mean that you have the confidence to not die?"

Climb shook his head, that wasn't it. It was because in his heart, Climb always carried with him a reason to cling onto life, even if he had to crawl on the floor. Sebas nodded deeply, as if he had read what was in Climb's heart by looking into his eyes. "I understand. Then I will start the training here."

"Here?"

"Yes. It will only take a few minutes. Please raise your weapon." What was he trying to do? With his mind filled with anxiety and confusion over the unknown and a faint glimmer of expectation and curiosity, Climb drew his sword. The sound of the blade sliding from its sheath rang out through the narrow alleyway. Sebas quietly stared as Climb assumed a middle stance. "Then I will begin. Concentrate." And in the next moment—

With Sebas at the center, it seemed as if blades of ice had shot out in every direction. Climb could no longer speak. A vortex of bloodlust was whirling around with Sebas at the center. Energy that was so dense that its color became visible crashed into him like a raging wave, making his heart feel as if it would explode in an instant. He thought that he heard a sound like a soul screaming as it was being crushed. It sounded as if it was coming from right by his side, a place far away, or perhaps from his own mouth.

As he was engulfed by the black stream of bloodlust, Climb felt his consciousness become dyed in white. The fear was so enormous that his mind was letting go of its consciousness in order to

ignore the situation. "…Is this all that a 'man' amounts to? This is only a warm-up." In Climb's fading consciousness, Sebas' disappointed voice sounded needlessly loud.

The meaning of those words lodged themselves deeply into Climb's mind, deeper than any blade. It was enough to very briefly let him forget the fear that was crashing into him from the front. *Thump.* His heartbeat grew louder. "Haaa!!" Climb released a large breath of air. His eyes were wet with tears and despite being so frightened that he wanted to run, he endured. The hands grasping the sword trembled and the tip of blade shook as if it had gone insane. The trembling that ran through his whole body caused his chain shirt to clink loudly.

However, Climb gritted his rattling teeth and tried to endure Sebas' bloodlust. Seeing his unsightly appearance, Sebas wore a sneer and slowly formed a fist with his right hand that was right in front of Climb's eyes. After a few blinks, the ball-like fist was completed. Like setting an arrow to a string, the fist was slowly pulled backwards. Even as he stood there trembling, Climb realized what was about to occur and shook his head side to side. Needless to say, his signal did not affect Sebas.

"Then… die." Like an arrow exploding from a taut string, Sebas' fist flew at him with the sound of it cutting the air. *This will be an instant death.* Climb realized this as time slowed down. It looked as if an enormous steel ball even taller than himself was hurtling towards him at a fierce speed. His mind was filled with the image of this complete, absolute death. Even if he were to raise his sword and use it as a shield, it will be easily shattered by the fist.

His body did not even budge. The enormous anxiety rendered it completely stiff. There was no way to escape the death in front of his eyes. Climb gave in to his fate and at the same time, became angry with himself. If he could not give his life for Renner, why didn't he just die back then? It would have been better for him to die alone, shivering in the cold rain.

In his eyes, he saw Renner's beautiful face. It is said that when people are close to death, they see their life flash before their very eyes. It is the effect from the brain searching the past memories for a way to escape the situation. Still, he found it slightly amusing that the last thing he saw was the smile of his master whom he loved and respected.

That's right. What Climb saw was Renner's 'smile'. Soon after she saved his life, the young Renner did not show her smile. When did she start smiling? He could not remember. However, he did recall seeing her smile shyly. If she knew of Climb's death, would that smile be destroyed? Like the dark clouds that block off the sun?

Don't make me laugh! Anger surged from the bottom of Climb's heart. She was the one who saved the life that was tossed out on the side of the road. If so, his life was not his own. This body was for Renner, to grant her even the smallest form of happiness—

There has to be a way to get out of this—! The chains of fear were shattered by the manifestation of an intense emotion. His hands moved. His legs moved as well. The eyes that were about to close shut were opened wide. He tried desperately with the naked eye to detect the ultrahigh speed fist heading his way. All of the senses in his body were pushed to their limit, to the point where he could even feel the air's vibrations.

Like how people display superhuman strength at the scene of a fire, during an emergency, the brain releases the safety placed on the muscles and allow them to display a strength that would otherwise be impossible. The brain secretes chemicals en masse and focuses the mind solely on survival. It quickly processes massive amounts of information and selects the most optimal action.

In this single moment, Climb had stepped foot into the world of first-rate warriors. However, even that was surpassed by the speed of Sebas' attack. It was possible that it was already too late, that there may no longer be any time left to dodge Sebas' fist. Even so, he had to move. How could he give up? In that rapid compression of time, his own movements appeared to be as slow as a turtle. Despite this, Climb desperately moved his body. And—

Boom. With a roar, Sebas' fist passed by Climb's face. The wind pressure from his strike ripped off a few strands of hair from his head. He heard a quiet voice ring out. "Congratulations. How does it feel to overcome the fear of death?"

…Unable to understand what he was saying, Climb wore a stupid expression on his face. "How did it feel to face death? And how did it feel to overcome it?" Climb panted heavily and stared at Sebas with an absent-minded expression. His face looked as if he had a few screws loose. The bloodlust had disappeared without a trace. It was only after Sebas' words finally entered his head that he could feel a sense of relief.

As if that intense bloodlust was all that had been holding him up, Climb collapsed like a puppet that had its strings cut. While on his hands and knees, he indulgently sucked in the fresh air into his lungs. "…It is fortunate that you did not die from shock. There are times when the body so strongly believes that it is dead that it forfeits its ability to sustain life." There was still something bitter left in Climb's throat. This must be what death tastes like, he thought.

"Repeating this several times will allow you to overcome most fears. But you must be cautious. Fear is what triggers the survival instinct. If it becomes completely paralyzed, then you will be unable to recognize even the most obvious of dangers. You must be able to distinguish between them."

"…T-though I am being rude, Sebas-sama, what are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"T-that bloodlust wasn't something that a normal person could give off. Just who…"

"At the moment, I am simply an old man who is confident in his skills." Climb could not take his eyes off of Sebas' smiling face. Although he seemed to be smiling gently, it also looked like the fearsome smile of an overwhelming power greatly surpassing Gazef. He was an existence that may even be stronger than Gazef, the strongest warrior in the surrounding countries.

Climb decided that his curiosity was satisfied with just that. He felt that no good would come from digging any deeper. However, the one thing that burned in his mind was the question of just who this old man named Sebas actually was. He even considered the possibility that he was one of the thirteen heroes from the past. "Then let us try it once mo—"

“W-wait! I have a question!” The frightened voice of a man sounded from behind, cutting off Sebas’ words.

Part 4

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 9:42

Brain stepped out of Gazef’s residence. He looked over his shoulder and memorized its exterior so that he could find his way back. He couldn’t remember what it looked like back when Gazef had dragged him here; his mind had been a bit hazy from hypothermia. He at least knew the location of Gazef’s house because he had planned to pay him a visit in order to challenge him to a fight. However, since he only heard of it through word of mouth, there was a small error in the information.

“That roof doesn’t have no damn sword stuck in it.” He closely observed the house while cursing the informant who gave him the wrong information. It was much smaller when compared to the houses that nobles lived in. If one had to compare, the house looked as if a decently wealthy citizen could live in it. Regardless, it was more than enough for three people: Gazef and the old couple working as live-in servants. Committing it to memory, Brain resumed his walk. He was not heading to any destination in particular. He no longer wanted to go around looking for magic items, weapons, or armor.

“What should I do…” His muttering disappeared into empty space. It wouldn’t matter even if he were to just go off somewhere and disappear. Even now, his mind was strongly drawn to that idea. Although he searched his heart for what he wanted to do, he only found an empty hole in its place. Not even the ashes of his shattered goal remained. So then why—

Looking down, the katana was in his right hand. Underneath his clothes, he was wearing his chain shirt. The reason that he was gripping this katana before he arrived at the capital was fear. Even if he knew that it would do nothing to the monster called Shalltear who blocked his attack at full power with the nail of her pinky, the anxiety of being without it was too much for him to bear.

Then why was he still holding it? It wouldn’t have mattered even if he left it behind. As expected, was it because he was nervous? Thinking it over, Brain tilted his head. No. However, as to what emotion prompted him to bring his katana with him, no answer came. Brain walked while remembering the capital from back when he visited it for the first time. While buildings like the palace and the Magician’s guild were unchanged, he spotted many buildings that were new. As Brain tried to enjoy the gap in his memory, there was a commotion further down the road.

He frowned at the commotion. The sound coming from in front of him was filled with the sharp feeling of violence. As he was about to turn to take a different path, his eyes became drawn to an old man. The old man looked as if he was slipping through the crowd as he headed deeper inside.

“…W-what? What are those movements?” His eyes blinked several times as words involuntarily spilled out. Those movements were too unbelievable. They made him think as if he had just seen a daydream, or perhaps a result of some sort of a spell.

It was doubtful whether even Brain could follow the old man’s movements. Such technique was only possible if one could read the flow of the push and pull forces generated by both the

individual and the whole crowd. What he saw was a mastery of the body. His feet moved towards the old man without hesitation. Having pushed aside the other people and arriving at the center of the crowd, what Brain saw was the moment when the old man struck the man's chin at high speed.

Just how? That attack just now… if it was me, could I have dodged it? That might be hard. Did he trick that man's senses? Am I just thinking too much? Anyways, that was a clean textbook strike, not a single wasted movement…

He could feel his groans of admiration spill from his mouth as he ruminated over the attack that he had just witnessed. Not only was he unable to see it clearly, it was very difficult to compare a swordsman and a martial artist using the same unit of measurement. However, even that short amount of time was more than enough to understand that the old man was considerably powerful.

The old man may even be stronger than him. While biting down on his lips, Brain compared the side of the old man's face with the data of skilled opponents that he had in memory. However, he was different from all of them. *Just who is he?* In the blink of an eye, the old man moved out of the crowd. A boy walked away, as if to follow him. Acting on impulse, like he was being drawn in, Brain began to follow the boy.

It felt as if the old man had eyes on his back, making it hard for Brain to follow him closely. But with the boy, that was not a concern. And even if the boy was found out, Brain himself would still be safe. Shortly after he started to tail them, Brain detected the presence of several other followers. However, whether they were following the old man or the boy was none of his concern.

Eventually, the two turned a corner and their path continued to grow darker. Brain felt nervous, it was like he was being lured out. Does the boy not think it's suspicious? Just as Brain began to wonder, the boy spoke to the old man. Because they had just turned a corner, Brain was able to hide in the alley and listen in. To sum up their conversation, the boy wanted to study under him.

What nonsense. That old man won't accept a greenhorn like him as a disciple. When comparing the abilities of the two, if the boy was a pebble, then the old man was like an enormous gem. They lived in completely different worlds. *…How pitiful. I didn't think that not knowing the difference in skill between you and others could be this pitiful. That's enough, kid.* Brain thought to himself without saying it out loud.

While he meant it for the boy, it was also directed at his past self who was foolish enough to believe that he was the strongest. As he continued to eavesdrop — he didn't pay much attention to the bit about brothels — it seemed to have been decided that the old man would train him maybe once or twice. An old man of that caliber, to a boy like him, Brain could think of nothing that would be worth teaching.

What's going on? Did my eyes get hazy again? No, that's not it. That kid's skills aren't anything special and he doesn't even have any talent! Just what sort of training was he going to give him? But from this position, he could only hear, not see. Unable to resist his curiosity, Brain killed his presence and slowly moved to try and peer over the corner. At that moment—

A terrifying energy pierced his entire body. His scream could not be described in words. His whole body froze solid. It felt as if a giant carnivore was breathing inches from his nose. The world was dyed in overwhelming bloodlust, rendering him unable to even blink, let alone move. It made

him wonder whether even his heart had stopped beating. This presence may even rival that of Shalltear Bloodfallen, Brain thought, the one he believed to be the strongest being in this world.

If the person was weak of mind, their heart would have stopped for real. His legs shaking, he dropped to the ground with a thud. *If I'm like this, could that kid be dead?* If he was lucky, then he would have fainted. Bent over, trembling as he supported himself with his arms, Brain searched for the presence of the two people— and witnessed an impossible scene. Although it was only for an instant, the shock made him completely forget his fear.

The boy was standing. Like Brain, his two legs were shaking in terror. Despite this, he was still standing. *W-What's going on? How can a kid like stay standing?* He could not understand how the boy could be standing while he himself was on his hands and knees in disgrace. Did the boy have a magic item that blocks fear or knew a martial art to that effect? Or did he possess some special talent?

He could not say for certain that the possibility did not exist. However, while staring at the boy's unreliable back, Brain knew intuitively that that was not the case. Although impossible, it was the only thing he could think of. The boy was stronger than Brain. *Ridiculous! How's that possible!* Although it looked like he trained his body, he still lacked volume. From watching how he moved his feet and body while following him, the boy didn't look to have much talent. Even though it was like that, the result was different.

W-What's going on? Am I that weak? His sight grew dim. Brain knew that tears were falling from his eyes. However, he could not summon the energy to wipe them away. "Uuu, ugh… kuh…" He tried his best to not cry out loud. Even so, his tears flowed endlessly. "Wh…y… why."

Brain grasped the dirt on the ground and focused his strength in order to stand. But the bloodlust that was crashing into this body made him unable to move an inch. As if he was being controlled by someone else, his legs did not budge. The best he could manage was to raise his face and look at the boy and the old man.

He saw his back. Even now, the boy was still standing. Even now, the boy was standing face to face with the old man and his bloodlust. The back that he had thought was weak seemed incredibly far away. "Was I…" *Always this weak?*

He felt angry with himself, for even after the bloodlust had dissipated, the best he could manage was to stand. Their training looked as if it was still going to continue. Unable to endure it any longer, Brain squeezed out his courage and shouted as he jumped out of his corner.

"W-wait! I have a question!" He no longer had the luxury of thinking that he shouldn't interfere with their training or that he should find the right timing to appear. The boy's shoulders jumped as the desperate voice caused him to turn around, revealing his surprised expression. If their positions had been reversed, Brain too, would have shown the same reaction. "First, I sincerely apologize for interrupting you two. Forgive me. I couldn't bear to wait any longer."

"…Is he someone you know, Sebas-sama?"

"No, he is not. I see, so you do now know him either…" They looked at him with suspicion. However, that was something he had already predicted. "First and foremost, my name is Brain

Unglaus. Once again, allow me to express my apologies for interrupting you two. I'm truly sorry." He bowed deeper than before. He could feel the two moving slightly.

After what he deemed long enough to express his sincerity, Brain raised his face and saw that their expressions contained less suspicion than before. "And what is your business with us?" From the old man's question, Brain glanced at the boy. "What is it?" As the boy pondered, Brain asked him a question, like coughing up blood. "Why… how can you remain standing after receiving that bloodlust?"

The boy's eyes widened slightly. Because his face was expressionless, such a slight movement felt like a large change in his emotions. "I'd like to hear it. That bloodlust was beyond what a normal person could endure. Even this body of mine… excuse me, even I couldn't endure it. But you were different, you endured it. You were standing. How were you able to do it?! How is something like that possible?!"

He could not talk like he usually did because of his excitement. However, it was difficult to suppress it. He who succumbed to his fear and ran in the face of Shalltear Bloodfallen's overwhelming strength, and the boy who received a bloodlust that was on par with her and remained standing, just where did that difference come from? He had to know no matter what. As if these thoughts were transmitted to him, although the boy appeared to be at a loss, he thought about it in earnest and replied. "…I don't know. In that whirlwind filled with that much bloodlust, I have no idea how I was able to endure it. But perhaps… it may have been because I was thinking of my master."

"…Master?"

"Yes. When I thought of the person I serve… strength rose up inside of me."

How do you endure with something like that? Although Brain wanted to shout that out, before he could do so, the old man quietly spoke.

"It means that his loyalty was greater than his fear. Unglaus-sama, humans are able to display an incredible power if it is for those who are important to them. Like how a mother raises a pillar to save her child trapped in a house, like how a husband supports his wife with one hand when she is about to fall, I believe that is the strength of humans. This person here as well, he displayed that strength. And he is not alone in this. If you have something that you would not trade for anything, then Unglaus-sama will be able to display a power greater than what you have come to expect from yourself."

Brain could not bring himself to believe him. The thing that he would not trade for anything, his 'desire for strength' ended up being meaningless. Too easily, it was destroyed. Did he not grow frightened and flee? As his expression gradually darkened and his face headed downward, the following words of the old man brought his face upright.

"…What is raised alone will be weak. After all, it will be over once you yourself are broken. Instead, if you build yourself up with another, if you can give your all for someone else, then even if you are broken you will not fall."

Brain thought to himself. Did he have that something? However, there was nothing. He had thrown them aside, thinking them to be useless and unnecessary for his pursuit of strength. It turned out that they were what were truly important. Brain laughed out loud. His life was filled with nothing but mistakes. Before he knew it, words spilled from his mouth like a confession. "I've thrown it all away. Is it too late for me to try again?"

"It will be fine. Even someone like me with no talent was able to do it. If it's Unglaus-sama, I have no doubt that you will be able to pull through! It's definitely not too late!" The boy's words had no proof. However, strangely enough, Brain felt a warm sensation spread through his heart. "You are kind and strong… I'm sorry." The boy fell into a flutter from the sudden apology. Someone with this much courage, he had mocked him and called him a kid. *Foolish. I was so, so foolish…*

"But if you say that you're Brain Unglaus… could you be the one who fought against Stronoff-sama in the past?"

"…So you remember… Did you perhaps watch the fight?"

"Ah, I wasn't able to see it. I merely heard of it from someone who did. That person said that Unglaus-sama was an incredible swordsman and that people with his skill in the Kingdom could be counted with one hand. Now that I've seen your posture and how you maintain your center of gravity as you move, I know that the person was speaking the truth!"

Pushed back by his genuine compliments, Brain stammered out a reply. "…Erm, th-thanks. I-I don't really think I'm that great, but… I'm a bit happy that you're giving me so much praise."

"Hmm… Unglaus-sama."

"Elder, just call me Unglaus. I'm not worthy to be referred with honorifics by someone like you, elder!"

"Then since my name is Sebas Tian, please call me Sebas. …Then Unglaus-kun." Although he felt a bit awkward at having 'kun' attached to his name, it wasn't strange when considering the difference in their ages. "How about you were to teach the sword to Climb-kun here? I believe that it will prove beneficial to Unglaus-kun as well."

"Ah, I apologize! My name is Climb, Unglaus-sama."

"Then elder… Excuse me, will Sebas-sama not be the one to teach him? It seemed you were discussing that before I interrupted."

"Yes, that was what I intended initially. But I felt that it was necessary that I deal with my guests— ah, here they are. It seems they were busy donning their equipment."

Brain belatedly turned his eyes in the direction that Sebas was looking. Three men showed themselves. They each wore a chain shirt and held a bladed weapon in their thick leather gloves. They clearly gave off a killing intent that surpassed mere hostility. Although their bloodlust was only directed at the old man, they did not seem to be the type to have mercy and spare witnesses.

Seeing the men, Brain unwittingly spoke out in a shrill voice filled with surprise. "No way! They're coming this way even after receiving that bloodlust? Are they that strong?!" Then he

could only imagine that each one of them was as skilled— no, even stronger than Brain himself. Was the reason that their shadowing was sloppy because they focused on perfecting their warrior skills instead? However, Brain's fears were rejected by Sebas.

"The bloodlust from earlier was only directed at you two."

"…What?" Even Brain thought that his own voice sounded stunned.

"For Climb, it was to train him. For you, because you seemed to have no intention of showing your face, I sent it to try and drag you out and to root out any hostility you might have along with your will to fight. I did not do it to those men because I knew that they were enemies from the beginning. It would be troublesome for me if they were to grow frightened by my bloodlust and flee, after all."

Sebas had sneaked in something terrifying in his explanation. Brain could not even bring himself to be surprised. To think that he could control bloodlust of that scale with such precision, that was no longer something that could be understood within the confines of common sense. "I-I see. Then do you know the identity of those men?"

"I could venture a guess but am not certain. That is why I intend to capture one or two for information. However—" Sebas bowed his head. "I do not wish for the two of you to be dragged into this. Will you not leave this place immediately?" Hearing his words, Climb asked him. "Before that, I have a question that I'd like to ask you. Those men… are they criminals?"

"…It seems that way. I don't think they're the type of people who've led proper lives." Having heard Brain's answer, fire burned in Climb's eyes. "Though I may only be in the way, I want to fight as well. As someone who protects the capital's peace, it's obvious that I must protect the citizens."

In his mind, Brain thought that there was no guarantee that Sebas was the just one in this situation. Well, no doubt that anyone who compares the men who just appeared with Sebas who gave off the impression of integrity would believe him to be the good side. But even so, there was no guarantee.

A greenhorn… However, he sympathized with him. When comparing the one who saved that child from the drunkards with these men, it was certain which side Brain would take. "Though you probably won't need any help… Sebas-sama, I will lend a hand as well."

Brain stood next to Climb. Sebas would not need any assistance… no, there would not even be any meaning in them being here. However, in order to try and imitate Climb who was fighting for the sake of someone else, Brain chose an answer that his past self would not. Even if the boy's heart was strong, his skill with the sword was lacking. He would protect him.

Brain glanced at the weapons the men were holding and frowned. "Poison… It seems that they're experienced seeing how they're using a weapon that could kill them… Are they assassins?" There were lines engraved on the blades of their daggers, also called mail breakers. The fluid on the blade gave off a sinister glint. And the way the way their nimble movements focused on mobility, different from those of swordsmen, all but confirmed Brain's words.

"Climb-kun, be wary. Although it would be different if you had a magic item that blocked poisons, consider yourself dead if you were to get hit even once." Even though Brain's great physical ability rendered the average poison ineffective, it would be difficult for Climb to resist them.

"Seeing how you did not attack immediately after revealing yourselves head on, is it fine to assume that you planned a pincer attack and have two more lying in wait? Since we have already passed that point, first, shall we break through?" Sebas purposefully spoke loud enough so that his opponents could hear him, causing the men to momentarily freeze. They were shaken because their plan to attack while surrounding them had been seen through.

"It seems that it is the safest option. It would be better to crush the front and then attack those in the rear." Brain agreed with Sebas. However, that idea was rejected by the one who made the suggestion. "Ah, but then there is the possibility that they will get away. I will take care of the three in the front. How about you two turn to the opposite side and face the two who will be coming?"

Brain replied that he understood and Climb nodded his head in agreement. This was Sebas' battle and they were the ones who were forcefully lending him their strength. As long as Sebas did not make a critical mistake, they would have to follow his instructions.

"Alright, let's go." Brain spoke to Climb and turned his back on the men. Although he showed his defenseless side to the people who were overflowing with hostility, thanks to Sebas, he was not worried. As he left his back to him, he felt a rising sense of security, as if a thick castle wall had been built around him.

"Now, though it is unfortunate… I will be your opponent. …Oh no, I cannot have you be unfaithful with these two." When Brain looked over his shoulder, Sebas was holding three daggers in the fingers of his right hand. He flicked his fingers and the daggers that the men threw towards Brain and Climb's defenseless backs all fell to the ground. The bloodlust in the men's eyes lessened considerably.

Obviously, seeing thrown daggers being blocked like that would make anyone lose their will to fight. So you guys finally realized just how strong Sebas-sama is, eh? But it's already too late. There was no way to escape from that old man. Even if the three of them were to split off into different directions.

"Incredible." Climb walked up next to Brain. "Indeed. If someone were to say that Sebas-sama is the strongest in the Kingdom, I'd have to nod my head."

"Even stronger than the Warrior-Captain?"

"You mean Stronoff. Truly, against that elder, I… I…, sorry. I'll speak how I normally speak. Even if Stronoff and I attacked him together, there's no way we could win. …Ah, they're here." Two men appeared once they circled around a corner. As expected, they were dressed like the three from before. There was a sound of swords being drawn and Brain followed suit.

"The reason that they didn't leave one as an ambush to throw a dagger was probably because the elder saw through them." An ambush was only effective if it was a surprise, failing that, they would only be splitting up their forces. Since they were found out, they probably determined that working together from the beginning would give them a higher chance of victory.

"It's a naive way of thinking. …Climb, I'll handle the guy on the right, you take the one on the left." Brain scanned the way they moved and guessing which one was the weaker of the two, gave the boy his instructions. The boy nodded and raised his sword. The lack of hesitation was unique to someone who experienced a situation where their life on the line. Brain was relieved that the boy wasn't a virgin of real battles.

Climb should be able to beat that guy but… since he's using poison, it'll be a close fight. Although Climb had real battle experience, he did not seem like someone who walked the kind of bloody path where fights against poison users were frequent. This may even be his first time fighting against poison. Brain as well, he was always overly cautious when fighting against monsters that used acid or venom, making it difficult for him to display his full strength in those situations.

Would it be better if I kill the guy on the right quickly and help him? Will that be to this guy's benefit? Will I be stepping on his determination to help with his own power? Should I just fight in his stead? No… will Sebas-sama help him in a pinch? Do I have to step in if there's no sign that he will help him? To think that I would worry about things like this… Brain scratched his head with the hand that wasn't holding the katana and glared directly at the enemy. "Now, sorry about this but I need you to become the sacrifice to fill my idle period."

Three strikes. Sebas closed in and with his fist, planted a strike into each man. They could not even react, let alone defend themselves. And with that, it was over. It was obvious. With battle strength that was considered to be top class even in Nazarick, Sebas could defeat assassins of this level with just his pinky.

He turned his eyes away from the collapsed men and watched the fight behind him. Brain was overwhelming his opponent from the beginning to the end and Sebas could watch him without worry. The assassin whom he was facing appeared to be looking for an opening so that he could escape.

However, Brain did not allow it and fought as if he was toying with him. No, rather than calling it that, it looked as if he was using a wide variety of attacks to try and remove the rust from his body. *He did mention something about an idle period. And it seems that the reason he's not attacking seriously is because he's worried about Climb and wants to be ready to jump in and help at any time. He's more considerate than I thought.*

Sebas moved his eyes from Brain to Climb. *This side should be fine as well.* An exchange of blows, although the poisoned weapon caused a bit of unease, the situation wasn't bad enough that he had to go and help immediately. It pained him that a friendly stranger was dragged into a mess that he caused. However—

Had you not told me that you wished to grow stronger, I would have gone over to help you. A battle with one's life on the line is also good training. I will help you if it becomes dangerous. Climb used his sword to redirect the opponent's thrust. Cold sweat flowed down his back. It had almost managed to stab into his armor. A look of disappointment flashed across his opponent's face. Climb placed his sword out in front of him and measured the space between them. His opponent on the other side shifted back and forth to stop him from measuring the distance.

Normally, Climb would block with his shield and use his sword to attack. His current predicament of fighting with only his sword shaved away at both his mind and body. Not only

that, the poisoned weapon also placed a great burden on him. He knew very well that mail breakers were specialized for thrusting, and as such, that was the only part that he had to be cautious of. But even so, as expected, the thought of being unable to sustain even a scratch dulled his movements.

He could feel his mounting fatigue, not only of his body, but his mind as well. His breathing grew ragged. *It's the same for my opponent. I'm not the only who's exhausted.* Like him, his opponent's forehead was slick with sweat. He was agile, using quick movements to throw the enemy into disarray, it was a style well suited for an assassin. That was why inflicting even a single wound on the arms or legs would make the assassin lose his advantage and destroy the balance of power between them.

The battle would be decided in a single attack. That was the reason for the restlessness that flowed between them. Of course, this was what a fight between those of similar skill was like. Regardless, it was even more pronounced in this particular battle.

"Haa!" With a heavy breath, Climb attacked. It was a small swing with little power behind it. A wide swing would open him up to a huge blind spot if he were to miss. The assassin easily dodged his attack and thrust his hand into his shirt. Predicting his next move, Climb became cautious of the assassin's hand.

Climb blocked the dagger that flew at his eyes with his sword. It was fortunate. Luckily, he was able to deflect the attack because he had carefully focused his attention. But without even giving him a chance to breathe a sigh of relief, the assassin charged in low.

Oh no! A shiver crawled down his spine. He had no way to block this additional attack. The fear from the dagger had made him deflect it with a large swing. Because his sword was still in the air, he could not bring it back fast enough to match the timing for a counterattack. Although he wanted to focus on dodging, the assassin had him beat in agility. He was cornered. At the very least, use his arm as a shield and—

As Climb made his resolve, the assassin who was charging at him suddenly covered his face and leapt back a great distance. A small stone the size of a pea came flying and struck the assassin's left eyelid. Pushed to his limits, Climb's accelerated mind confirmed it. Even without turning around, he knew who had thrown it. As proof, he heard Sebas' voice coming from behind him.

"Fear is a precious emotion. However, you must not be overcome by it. I was watching from a bit earlier, but this is quite a dull and half-hearted battle. If your opponent had the resolve to sacrifice an arm, it would have certainly meant your death. If your strength leaves you, win with your head. There are times when the mind surpasses the body."

Yes! Answering in his head, he was surprised that he had regained his composure. It was not a feeling of security from relying on someone to help him. Rather, it was because someone was watching over him. He could not completely wipe away the fear that he may die. However—

"If… I die, please tell Renner-sama… please tell the princess that I fought well." He let out a long sigh and quietly raised his sword. Climb noticed that the light in the assassin's eyes was different than before. Although their time was brief, perhaps their hearts had found a connection through this battle with their lives on the line.

Like how Climb found his resolve, the assassin seemed to have noticed and found his as well. The assassin stepped forward. Needless to say, he closed the distance without a word. Confirming that he had entered his range, Climb brought down his sword. In that instant, the assassin leapt back. He had read the speed of Climb's sword and used himself as a bait to try for a feint.

But there was one thing that the assassin had missed. Without a doubt, the assassin had seen through most of Climb's sword techniques. However, that was only excluding just one attack, the vertical slash that Climb was confident in. It was heavier and faster than any of his other attacks.

The sword that lodged in the assassin's shoulder was stopped by the chain shirt and did not completely cut him in two. However, it easily broke through his collarbone, cut through the flesh, and even shattered his shoulder blade. The assassin thrashed about as he rolled around on the ground. The pain was so intense that his scream was silent, spit dribbling from his mouth.

"Splendid." Sebas appeared from behind and effortlessly kicked the assassin in his abdomen. With only that, the assassin became like a puppet with its strings cut and did not move. He had fallen unconscious. In the corner of his eyes, Brain had already defeated his assassin and was slightly raising his hand to congratulate him.

"Then let us start the interrogation. If you have anything that you wish to hear, please don't hesitate and ask." Sebas brought one of them over and woke him up. The man's body shook as he regained consciousness, Sebas then moved his hand to the man's forehead. All of this did not even take two seconds.

Although he wasn't pressing down on it very hard, the man's head arched back and returned like a pendulum. The man's eyes had already lost focus, like the eyes of a drunkard. Sebas began his questioning. Although an assassin's lips should have been sealed tight, the man did not hide anything and chattered away. Seeing that strange scene, Climb asked. "What did you do?"

"It's a skill called 'Palm of the Puppeteer'. It's fortunate that it activated without a hitch." Although it was a skill that he had never heard of, more importantly, Climb frowned at the man's information. They were assassins from Eight Fingers who were trained by one of the 'Six Arms', the strongest members of the security group. They were following Sebas in order to kill him. Brain asked Climb. "…I'm not too sure but, aren't the Eight Fingers a pretty big criminal organization? I think they have connections with the mercenary groups…"

"You're correct. 'Six Arms' is the name of the six strongest members of that organization. I heard that each one of them rivals the strength of adamantite rank adventurers. We do not know what they look like since that is a matter regarding the underworld."

And Succulent, the one who appeared at Sebas' residence, was a member of Six Arms who was called the 'Devil of Illusions'. His plan was to have Sebas killed so that he could freely manipulate his beautiful master. Having heard up to this point, Climb felt a chill sweep over him. The chill was coming from Sebas. As Sebas slowly stood up, Brain asked him a question. "Then what will Sebas-sama do from here on out?"

"I've decided. I will first destroy the problematic location. From what he said, it seems Succulent is there as well. A spark should be quickly stamped out." Both Climb and Brain drew in their breaths at his wholly unconcerned reply. The fact that he was going to attack them meant he was

confident enough to win against adamantite rank adventurers— in other words, the strongest of mankind. But even that felt acceptable. *He defeated three of these assassins in an instant and even that famous Unglaus-sama is wary of him. Just who is Sebas-sama? Was he an adamantite rank adventurer in the past?*

"…However, it appears that they have kidnapped several people. It will be better for me to act quickly."

"Right, if the assassins don't return, they would realize that something went wrong and move the kidnapped people elsewhere. Then we wouldn't be able to rescue them." The more time passes, the more disadvantageous it will be for this side whilst at the same time, the more advantageous it will be for the enemy. That was the current situation of the person called Sebas. "Then I will begin my assault immediately. I apologize but I have no intention of changing my mind. May I ask that you two take these assassins to the guard office?"

"Ahhh, wait Sebas-sama! If it's okay with you, please allow me to help! Of course, only with your approval."

"I agree as well, Sebas-sama. As Renner-sama's subordinate, safeguarding the capital's public order is my obvious duty. If the Kingdom's people are suffering, I will save them with my sword."

"…Though Unglaus-kun will probably be fine, it might be a bit dangerous for Climb-kun."

"I am aware of the dangers."

"Hey, Climb… you ever heard of only being a burden? Well, from Sebas-sama's point of view, there's probably not too much of a difference between me and you."

"No no, that wasn't what I meant. I was only worried about Climb-kun's safety. Please know that I will not be able to protect you like before."

"I'm prepared."

"…What we are about to do now may end up harming your, or your master's, honor. Are there no other opportunities that would be more fitting for you to risk your life?"

"Closing my eyes because it's dangerous would only prove that I am not a man fit to serve my master. Like how that person helps others, if it's possible, I want to extend my hand to those who suffer." *Like when she extended her hand to me—*

As if they had caught a glimpse of his firm determination, Sebas and Brain turned to look at one another. "…Have you prepared your resolve?" From Sebas' question, Climb nodded his head once. "I understand. Then there is nothing more that needs to be said. Please lend me your strength."

5章 鎮火、舞い上がる火の粉

Chapter 5: Extinguished, Soaring Sparks of Fire

Part 1

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 12:07

"The shop is through this door and according to the assassin; there is another entrance over at that building." Standing in front of the entrance of the brothel, in front of the door where Tsuare had been thrown away, Sebas pointed to a building several doors down. Although both Brain and Climb were present when extracting the information, they had never actually been to the brothel and obediently accepted Sebas' explanation.

"That's what I heard as well. They said that entrance is used as an emergency exit and always has at least two people guarding it. In that case I think it would better for us to split up into two groups. Considering our fighting strength, how about letting Sebas-sama take the main entrance by himself while Climb and I attack from that side??"

"Although I have no objections, what does Climb-kun think about it?"

"I have none as well. But Unglaus-sama, once we go inside, what then? Should we conduct a search together?"

"Please call me Brain, same goes for Sebas-sama. Anyway… though we should stick together to be safe, there could be a secret passage even the assassins didn't know about. I think we're going to have to search quickly while Sebas-sama is distracting the enemy head on." As if he was recalling something, Brain muttered how it's common for there to be a passage that only the boss would know of. "Then how about we split up once we get inside?"

"…As long as we're prepared for the dangers, we have to act and hope for the best." At Brain's words, Sebas and Climb nodded their heads. "Then since you are stronger than me, could I leave searching the interior to you, Unglau— Brain-sama?"

"I believe that would be best. I will leave Climb-kun with securing the exit over there." Needless to say, searching the interior carried a high risk of running into the enemy. Since Brain was much stronger than Climb, the task would fall to him.

"Then this will be it for our final confirmation." Although they held a general discussion before arriving at the brothel, because they had not yet seen the actual location, there were parts that were still uncertain. Now, all of that had been decided and there were none who objected to Sebas' plan.

Sebas placed a foot forward and approached the thick metal door. The door that Climb thought he himself would never be able to open no matter what he did, when compared side by side with Sebas, looked like a thin piece of paper.

The front was where the defenses were naturally the highest. Even though they were about to attack such a place, it was not a concern. Brain Unglaus, who fought on equal footing with Gazef Stronoff, the strongest in the surrounding countries, such a person stated that 'both of them together would not be able to win'. The being who could only be described to be in a different league was now stepping forward.

"Then you should be off. According to the assassins, four knocks on that entrance should be the signal to show that you are an ally. I do not think that you've forgotten, but just in case."

"Thank you." He did not forget, but regardless, Climb thanked Sebas. "And if possible, I will try to capture them alive. But should they resist, I will kill them without mercy. I assume that will not be a problem?" Both Climb and Brain felt a shiver down their spines as Sebas spoke with a gentle smile.

He was not wrong, his was the obvious response. Both of them knew that if they themselves were in that same situation, they would opt to do the same. The reason that they grew fearful and felt a chill down their spines was because Sebas' face looked as if had an alternate persona.

A kind gentleman and a cool-headed warrior, the extremes of kindness and heartlessness were coexisting with one another. They felt a premonition; if Sebas were to go in as he is now, everyone inside would die.

Climb nervously spoke to Sebas, "If it is to avoid needless bloodshed as much as possible, then it can't be helped. After all, we are few in number. But if you spot someone who seems like a high-ranking member, could you capture him alive? Interrogating that person could prove to be more beneficial in the future."

"I am not a murderer, Climb-kun. Please rest assured, I did not come here to purposefully slaughter them." Climb felt relieved by his gentle smile. "I apologize. Then I leave myself in your care."

♦ ♦ ♦

"Now then, allow me to swiftly destroy this place and buy some time." If Sebas destroyed this brothel, it should stop their dealings with him, albeit temporarily. If he was lucky enough to find confidential papers and the like, they would have to focus on how to retaliate and may even forget about Tsuare completely. In the worst case, even if the result ended up only buying some time, it could provide an opportunity for him to let Tsuare escape. He may even be able to find a better way.

"Now that I recall, there was a merchant in E-Rantel who spoke to us amicably. Perhaps I can ask him for assistance." Even if Tsuare's mind were to make a full recovery, she would be happier if she had the support of someone she could trust. Sebas turned and looked again at the thick door. He touched it while remembering the scene of Tsuare being thrown away. The door was imposing, with iron lodged into the wood. A single glance was all that it took to know that it would be difficult for a human to destroy it without using tools.

"I worry about Climb…" He did not have to worry about the man named Brain Unglaus. Even if he faced off against Succulent, his chance of winning was high. But Climb was different. He would not stand a chance. Climb was the one who volunteered to take part in the raid— seeing how he

offered his aid, Climb seemed prepared. However, the loss of a young life who tried to help him would be regrettable, especially if it was the life of such a good person.

"I wish for that boy to live a long life…" His words were suited to be spoken by those who had lived a long time. Of course, Sebas was created as an old man so considering the time from when he was born to now, he would be younger than Climb. "At the very least, it would be best if I am the one to defeat Succulent. I only hope that Climb-kun will not run into him." Sebas prayed to the 41 Supreme Beings for Climb's safety.

If Succulent was the strongest in this facility, then it was likely that Sebas would be the one to face him. However, if he was working as someone's bodyguard, there was also the possibility that he would flee while protecting him. With a worried heart, Sebas grabbed the handle on the door and turned it.

He could only turn it halfway through. Considering the kind of business this was, it was obvious that the door would be locked. "I am not skilled at picking locks… no choice then. I will have to try and open the lock my own way." Sebas muttered in annoyance and lowered his body. He pulled back his right hand as he held out his left hand in front of him. It was a splendid stance, as sturdy as a deeply rooted thousand-year-old tree.

"Hm!"

What happened next was impossible. His arm had become lodged in the edges of the steel door, into the hinges. No, it did not stop there. His arm continued to dig in deeper. With a screech, the hinges announced their parting from the wall. Sebas freely opened the door that had lost its resistance.

"What…the…?" As soon as he stepped inside, there was a hallway and a large man with spiked hair stood in front of a half-open doorway. His eyes and mouth were wide open as he wore a dumbfounded expression.

"It was slightly rusted so I forced it open with a bit of strength. You should keep the door well oiled." Sebas spoke to the man and closed the door. No, perhaps it would be better to say that he propped it up. As the man stood stupefied, Sebas walked further inside without reserve.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"What was that noise?!"

The voices of other men could be heard behind the man. However, being face to face with Sebas and unable to even react to their voices, the man spoke. "…W…W-Welcome?" The man fell into confusion and could only stare vacantly as Sebas walked up to his face. Normally, a person who worked in a place such as this would be used to violence. However, the scene that the man had just witnessed was far too estranged from his common sense that he had nurtured up to this moment.

Ignoring the questions from his allies behind him, the man gave Sebas a flattering smile. It was because his survival instincts told him that that was the best course of action. He could also have been desperately lying to himself that this man was a butler who served one of their customers.

The man and his bushy beard, his cheeks twitching as he tried his damnedest to show a hospitable smile, such appearance was truly an eyesore.

Sebas also wore a smile; soft and gentle. However, there was no kindness to be found in his eyes. They held a vicious glint that could captivate people, like a sharp blade. “Could you please step aside?” A ‘thud’, no, more like a ‘splat’. A sickening sound rang out. A rough-looking adult man wearing equipment would easily weigh more than 85 kilograms. A man like that went spinning into the air like some joke and was blown aside at a speed that was too fast for the eye to follow. Just like that, the man’s body crashed into the wall with a loud splash.

The house shook as if it had been struck by a fist of a giant. “…Oh no, if I killed him a bit further inside then he would have been a good psychological barricade… Well, it seems there are more left so I will have to be more careful from now on.” Sebas told himself that he should restrain his strength a little as he left the corpse to this side and moved further inside.

Sebas opened the door wide and stepped into the room. With graceful movements, he looked around him. Rather than someone who was charging into the enemy camp, he gave off the air of a person who was taking a stroll around a deserted house.

There were two men. They were staring dumbfounded at the crimson flower on the wall behind Sebas. The room was filled with the smell of cheap alcohol of the likes that you would never find in Nazarick. It mixed with the smell of blood and entrails and gave rise to a bizarre, stomach-churning aroma.

Sebas put together the information that he heard from Tsuare and the assassin and tried to map out the structure of this building’s interior in his head. Although Tsuare’s memory was filled with holes and had little to offer, he did hear that the real shop was located in the basement. The assassin had never been down there and was of no help from this point onward.

Although Sebas watched the floor, he could not find the stairs as they were well hidden. If he could not find it himself, then he simply had to ask someone who knew. “Pardon, I have a question that I’d like to ask you.”

“Guaahh!” As soon as he spoke to them, one of the men let out a high-pitched scream. It seemed that now, the thought of fighting itself had vanished from his mind. Sebas felt relieved. He could not control his strength very well if he thought about Tsuare and his fists would end up killing them instantly.

If he they gave up the notion of fighting back, he could stop at just breaking both of their legs. The men who were trembling in fear flattened their backs against the wall, all in an attempt to try and get as further away from Sebas as possible. Sebas watched them without emotion and his mouth tore into a smile.

“Hiiii!” They grew more frightened and the smell of ammonia spread into the surroundings. Sebas thought that he may have gone too far in scaring them and furrowed his brow. One of the men rolled back his eyes and fainted. The extreme tension had caused him to let go of his consciousness on his own. The other man looked at his comrade with an envious expression. “Haa… as I have just said, I’d like to ask you a question. I have business below. Could you tell me how I might find my way?”

"…T-that's." Sebas saw the light of fear in the man's eyes as he considered betrayal. Although the assassins were the same way, it appeared that this man feared the organization's purge as well. Remembering about the man who fled with the money he received and how he acted, being purged probably meant death. Since it appeared that he would not talk without being taught a lesson, Sebas said the words that would cut down the man's hesitation.

"It seems that there are two mouths here. It does not matter to me whether you are the one to speak." The man started to sweat profusely from his forehead and his body trembled. "O-O-O-Over there! There, that's where the secret entrance is!"

"Indeed." Looking at where he was pointing, it really did look like the seams of that floor were different. "I see. Thank you. Then you have done your part." As Sebas smiled, the man understood the meaning hidden behind his words and trembled, his face growing pale. Even so, he held onto a tiny, thin ray of hope and spoke.

"I-I'm begging you, j-just don't kill me!"

"I refuse."

The immediate reply froze the room in silence. The man's eyes grew round, the expression of a person trying to deny what he did not want to believe. "But, I told you! Hey, I'll do anything, so let me live!"

"That is true, but…" Sebas breathed out a sigh and shook his head. "I refuse."

"You… you're kidding, right?"

"If that is what you wish to believe. There is only one result to come of this."

"…Please… god."

Sebas remembered the time when he picked up Tsuare and slightly narrowed his eyes. What right did a man of this kind of profession have to ask something of god? And to Sebas, the 41 Supreme Beings were his gods. It felt as if they had just been insulted. "This is what you deserve."

From the steely voice that rejected everything, the man seemed to have realized that he was going to die. Was he going to run, or fight? The moment when that choice was placed before his very eyes, without hesitation, the man chose— to flee. Even if he were to fight Sebas, the result was obvious. Instead, no matter how small it was, he had a better chance of surviving if he ran. The thinking behind his decision was correct.

Because for a few seconds, no, even though it was only for a tenth of a second, his life had been extended. Having instantly caught up to the man who was making a break for the door, Sebas lightly turned his body. The gust of wind went past the man's head and he collapsed like his strings had been cut. A round object hit the wall with a thud and rolled down to the floor, leaving behind a trail of blood.

A moment later, blood sprouted from the man's headless neck and sprayed onto the floor. That was truly a splendid technique. To blow away a head with a roundhouse kick, although it had the

speed and power to make something like that possible, the most frightening part was that not a single stain could be found on Sebas' shoe covering his foot.

With the sound of his footsteps, Sebas walked towards the man who had fainted with his eyes rolled back and brought down his foot. With the sound like an old tree breaking, the man's body convulsed. After a few spasms, he no longer budged. "…Is it not self-evident what would happen to you from everything that you people have done thus far? But rest assured, at the very least, you have atoned with your bodies."

Sebas retrieved their corpses. He lined the area around the stairs with the utterly destroyed bodies. Even looking at them was horrifying; it would strike fear and hesitation to any who tries to flee. It was a method that Sebas thought of should he be unable to destroy the point of entry.

After moving the corpses, Sebas brought his foot down on the secret floor entrance. First was the sound of mechanical parts being destroyed. Following that, a large hole opened up on the floor. The broken floor cover loudly tumbled down the sturdy stairs. "Aha… If I just destroy these stairs, then it would be difficult for them to escape through this way."

♦♦♦

The room was not very large. The desolate interior had a wardrobe to store garments and a bed, nothing else. The bed was not the shoddy kind which would only have a sheet on top of it. Rather, it was a mattress stuffed with cotton, a luxury used by nobles. However, as if they focused on functionality, the design was plain and its ornaments lacked flavor.

And on top of it was a naked man. He looked to be well over his middle age. Due to a life of indulgence, his body was fat and unattractive. Although his looks could have been passed off as barely average, the blubber on his face lost him points fast. Looking at him, anyone would think that this man was like a pig. Pigs were smart, charming animals that liked things that were clean. However, in this case, the pig was stupid and base, used as an insult.

His name was Stafan Hevish. He brought down his raised fist— towards the mattress. The sound of hitting flesh rang out. A look of euphoria rose to Stafan's flabby face. It was because the sensation of crushing flesh was transmitted to his hand and he felt a quivering pleasure ride up his spine. His body then shivered. "Ohhh…"

As he slowly raised his fist, it came away sticky with blood. Stafan was lying on top of a naked woman. Her face was swollen and her skin was dyed with red spots due to internal bleeding. The blood flowing from her crushed nose matted her face. Both her lips and eyes were swollen as well and her former attractive face was nowhere to be found. The bedding was discolored, the scattered blood staining the sheets. The hands that had been raised in the air to try and protect her face now rested on the bed. The image of her hair sprawled out on top of the sheets made it look as if she was floating on water.

"Hey, what, you're already done? Ahn?" The woman no longer seemed to be conscious. Stafan raised his fist and slammed it down. *Smack.* The fist and the cheeks, along with the cheekbone inside, pain from the collision was also transmitted to Stafan's hand. "Che, it hurts!"

In a fit of rage, he struck again. The bed creaked along with the sound of beating. The woman's skin that was swollen like a ball split open and his fist became covered in blood. Fresh, sticky blood splattered onto the bed sheets and stained them in red.

"… …Uuu." Even though she was being beaten, the woman no longer moved and her body barely showed any reaction. If this repeated beating continued, her life would be in danger. Even so, the reason that she was still alive was not because Stafan was controlling his strength. It was because the impact was absorbed by the mattress. If she had been beaten on the hard floor, she would have already been dead.

Stafan didn't hold back his strength not because he knew this, but because there would not be any problems even if the woman were to die. If he just paid the cost to have her disposed, then everything would be taken care of. In reality, Stafan had killed multiple women in this shop. Since he had paid the disposal fee back then, leaving his pockets feeling lighter, perhaps he unconsciously held back the strength from his hands.

Stafan licked his lips as he stared at the woman's unmoving face. This brothel was the best place to fulfill a certain fetish. Something like this would never be allowed in a normal brothel. No, even if was allowed, Stafan did not know of any. He liked the days back when there were slaves.

Slaves had been considered property and those who had abused them had the tendency of inviting scorn. It was the same reason that people frowned upon those who squander away their fortune. But for someone like Stafan, who had a peculiar fetish, slaves were the easiest and only way for him to satisfy his lust. Now that they were taken from him, Stafan had no choice but to vent his lust in these types of places. What would he have done if he hadn't known about this place?

Without a doubt, he would have been unable to endure it. He would have committed a crime and been arrested. And the one who introduced this brothel to Stafan — though he had to make backroom dealings and use his legal influence for their benefit — he was truly grateful to his master, the noble whom he served.

"Thank you— master." A quiet emotion rose to Stafan's eyes. Although it was hard to believe considering his nature and personality, at the very least, he felt a deep gratitude towards his master. Only—

Fire rose from the inside of his stomach— anger. It was his emotions regarding the girl who was the reason why he lost his slaves, his outlet for his lust. "—that bitch!" His face was dyed red in anger; his eyes were bloodshot.

The face of the royalty that he had to serve— of the princess, overlapped with the face of the woman he was on top of. Stafan gathered the anger building inside of him in his fist and brought it down.

With a smack, fresh blood splattered once more. "How, refreshing, would, it, feel, to, mess, up, her, face!" Over and over, he beat the woman's face. The inside of her mouth must have been split open by a tooth. An alarmingly large amount of blood trailed out from between her swollen lips. The woman's only reaction now was to twitch every time she was struck.

"—Haa, haa." After several hits, Stafan's shoulders heaved and both his forehead and his body were wet with oily sweat. Stafan looked down at the woman beneath him. Her appearance was now past the point of being hideous. She was half dead, no; her body was already a few steps deep in death's mire. She was truly a puppet that had its strings cut.

Gulp. The sound of Stafan's throat rang out. Nothing excited him more than doing it with a battered woman. Especially if they used to be beautiful, the more beautiful they were the better. There was nothing that sated his sadism more than when he destroyed something beautiful.

"How good would it feel if I could mess her up like this?" Stafan recalled the mistress of the residence that he had visited earlier. He remembered the arrogant face of the woman whose beauty rivaled that of this country's princess, the one who was hailed to be the most beautiful.

Of course, Stafan knew that he could not do anything to a woman like her. The ones who took care of his cravings were the daily scraps of this brothel before they were disposed of. A beautiful woman like her would be bought by a powerful noble for a huge sum and imprisoned in their domain as to not reveal their illicit trading.

"Just once, if I could beat a woman like that— beat her to death." If something like that was possible, how enjoyable and satisfying would it be? Needless to say, it was an impossible dream. Stafan looked at the woman lying beneath him. Her exposed chest was slightly moving up and down. Having confirmed this, his lips became wickedly twisted.

Stafan grabbed the woman's chest, causing it to contort greatly in his hand. The woman showed absolutely zero reaction. She could no longer react to a pain of this level. Currently, the only difference between the woman beneath Stafan and a mannequin was that she was soft. Only that Stafan felt a small dissatisfaction over her lack of resistance.

Please don't kill me

Please forgive me.

I'm sorry.

Please stop.

The woman's screams were revived in Stafan's mind. Should he have raped her when she could still speak like that? With the tiniest feeling of regret, Stafan continued to play with the woman's chest. Nearly all of the women who end up at this brothel, their minds were already broken and their hearts fled elsewhere. Looking at it that way, it could be said that Stafan's partner for today was better than usual.

"Was that girl like that too?" What Stafan was recalling in his mind was Tsuare. He didn't even want to hear what happened to the man who had let her go. However, Stafan could not stop the jeer from showing on his face when he thought of the old butler whom he had visited earlier in the day.

What use was there in sheltering a girl who had done it with countless men and when the situation called for it, with women and even non-humans? He could barely contain his laughter when the butler showed that he was willing to pay a fortune of several hundred gold pieces.

“Now that I think about it, that runaway woman’s voice was pretty good.” He searched his memories and recalled the girl’s screams. Compared to the others who ended up here, she hadn’t been all that bad. Stafan grinned and moved to fulfill his carnal desires. He grabbed the woman’s leg with one hand and wrenched it open. The bone showed through her emaciated leg and was thin enough to fit in one of Stafan’s hands. With the woman’s crotch spread bare, Stafan mounted her. He grabbed what had hardened from his lust and—

With a click, the door slowly opened.

“What?!” Stafan quickly turned towards the door and saw an old man who seemed familiar. He then immediately recalled the old man’s identity. He was the butler he met at that residence. The old man— Sebas entered the room without restraint, his steps ringing out the sound of his heels. From how he walked in so naturally, Stafan could not say a word.

Why was the butler from that house here? Why did he enter this room? Faced with a situation that he could not understand, the inside of Stafan’s mind became blank. Sebas stood next to Stafan. And after looking at the woman who was lying beneath him, he turned his cold eyes in Stafan’s direction. “Do you enjoy beating others?”

“What?” The strange atmosphere prompted Stafan to immediately get up and reach for his clothes. However, even before that, Sebas had already begun to move. *Slap.* Such a sound rang out right by Stafan’s side and at the same time, his vision shook greatly. A moment later, his right cheek grew hot and he could feel the pain spreading wildly. He had punched him— no, he had been slapped across the face. Stafan finally managed to realize what had just happened.

“You bastard, doing something like—” *Slap.* Again, Stafan’s cheek cried out in pain. And just like that, it did not stop. Left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right—

“Shtaaalp!” Stafan had always been the one who hit others but had never been struck himself. His eyes welled with tears. He covered his cheeks with both hands while retreating backwards. As if his cheeks had been burned, the pain slowly began to spread.

“Y-you bashtard! You shink you can get awhay vithe thish?!” His swollen red cheeks throbbed every time he spoke.

“I can’t?”

“Of courshe not! You imbeshile! Who do you shink I am!”

“A fool.” He easily closed the distance that Stafan had put between them and— *Slap!* Once again, Stafan’s cheeks burned.

“Shtaaahp! Please shtahp it!” Stafan covered his cheeks like a child being scolded by his parents. Although he liked violence, the people he beat on were always the ones who were powerless to resist. Even if he were to go up against Sebas, who looked like an old man on the outside, Stafan would be too scared to hit him. He could not when he had no guarantee that his opponent could not fight back.

As if he had understood what was inside Stafan's heart, Sebas' eyes seemed to have lost interest as they turned towards the woman. "What a horrible thing you have done…" Stafan ran past Sebas who had walked up next to the woman.

"Moron!" Stafan's head filled with heat. What a stupid old man. He would call for the men in this building and teach him a lesson. Now that he has done something like this to him, he would never forgive him so easily. He would have him taste horrible pain and fear.

In his mind, he thought of the butler's beautiful master. The master was responsible for the errors of the servant. He would have them both take responsibility for this pain. He will make them realize who they had struck. With such thoughts in his mind and his belly flopping up and down, Stafan ran outside.

"Hey! Ish anyone there?!" He shouted in a loud voice. One of the employees should be coming soon. However, he realized that his thoughts were betrayed after stepping out into the hallway. It was quiet. Quiet enough to feel as if the place was empty. While naked, Stafan nervously looked around his surroundings. The silence that lingered over the hallway— the strange atmosphere instilled fear into Stafan.

Looking to either side of him, there were many doors. It went without saying that no one would come out of them. A shop where people with special fetishes— even dangerous ones, visited often would be perfectly soundproof. But there was no way that the employees could not hear him. He had seen several employees back when he was ushered to his room. All of them had been rough-looking men and had splendid builds that an old man like Sebas could not compare with. "Why ishn't anyone coming?!"

"—because they are either dead or unconscious." A low voice responded to Stafan's shouting. He hastily turned around and saw Sebas standing quietly. "It seems there are a few inside… most of them are asleep."

"T-thatsh's not posshible! Just how many do you shink are here?!"

"…Three people who look to be employees, ten below. And there are seven people like you."

What was he saying? Stafan stared at Sebas with that kind of expression.

"For the time being, there is no one here who will come running to your aid. Even if they should regain consciousness, I destroyed their legs and broke their arms. They will have to crawl here like maggots." An expression of shock surfaced from Stafan's face. He thought that it was impossible, but the strange atmosphere within the brothel made him realize that Sebas was speaking the truth. "However, I do not feel the need to keep you alive. I will have you die here."

He made no move to draw a blade or a weapon and merely approached in silence, seemingly unconcerned. Stafan feared that incredibly normal movement. He realized that Sebas was really going to kill him. "Wait! Wait! I half a gooh proposhishon for you!"

"…It is difficult for me to understand you. Do you mean to say that you have a good proposition for me? Let me think… I am not interested."

"Shen why are you shoing shomshing like thish!" There was no reason for him to end up in a situation like this. Just what reason could there be for him to die? For the first time, Sebas was able to understand his thoughts. "…Even when you think of everything that you have done thus far, you still do not know?" Stafan tried to remember. Did he do something that he shouldn't have?

Sebas sighed. "…I see." At the same speed as his words, Sebas' delivered a powerful front kick to Stafan's stomach. "So this is what it means for someone to not deserve to live." Stafan was assaulted by the unbelievable pain of several of his internal organs exploding. Although it wouldn't have been strange for him to fall unconscious from the pain and die, he only felt faint while his consciousness still remained.

It hurts!

It hurts!

It hurts!

Even though he wanted to scream and thrash about, the pain was so intense that he could not even move. "Die as you are." Stafan heard a chilling voice. Although he wanted to beg for his life, his throat did not move. Sweat entered his eyes and his vision grew murky. Within it, he saw Sebas' back as he walked away.

Save me!

Save me!

I'll give you as much money as you want so save me!

The one who could respond to the silent voice begging for help was already gone. In the end, Stafan died slowly with excruciating pain flaring from his abdomen.

Part 2

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9) Day 3, 12:12

"Climb, I'm going to kill all of the guys upstairs. We don't have anything to tie them up with and it'll be bad if something goes wrong and they scream for help. Even if I knock them unconscious, it'll be dangerous if they wake up when we're going in blin… what, what's wrong?"

"N-No, it's nothing." Climb shook his head to rid himself of his unease. Although his heart was beating loudly like when he ran with all his might, he ignored it. "My apologies, I'm fine now. I am ready to begin whenever."

"Is that so? …Hmm, it seems you've changed the way you think. You've been different since we got here. Right now, you have the face of a warrior. I know you're anxious. After all, there are a lot of people here that you can't beat. But relax, I'm here and Sebas-sama is here as well. Just focus on staying alive for the person who supports you."

He patted Climb on the shoulder and with his katana already drawn, Brain knocked four times on the door. Climb also gripped his sword. They could hear footsteps approaching from the other

side of the door and the sound of it being unlocked rang out three times. Like they planned, Climb threw the door open.

Before they could even hear any panicked voices, Brain charged. The sound of flesh being cut could be heard, soon followed by the sound of something dropping to the floor with a thud. Climb followed him inside. Brain who had gone ahead of him was already cutting down a second man. Other than that, Climb saw a man in leather armor holding a short sword. Climb closed the distance between them in an instant.

"Wha! Who are you?!" In a panic, the man swung his short sword but it was easily deflected by Climb's blade. He then brought down his overhead swing in a single breath. The man tried to block it with his short sword but it was just not enough to stop the slash that had Climb's entire body weight behind it. Climb's sword knocked away his opponent's weapon and slashed through the man's shoulder and through the nape of his neck.

As the man collapsed groaning in pain, an incredible amount of blood spilled out onto the floor; enough to make one wonder just where it had all come from. His body went into convulsions as he neared death. Having determined that it was a fatal wound, Climb maintained his stance and remained cautious as he retreated to a corner of the room. Behind him, he heard Brain run up the stairs leading to the second floor.

Having confirmed that the only things in the interior were ordinary furniture, Climb ran for the next room. A minute later. Having searched around each of their respective floors and confirming that there were no more enemies, Climb and Brain met up at the entrance. "I searched the first floor and saw no signs of other people."

"Same with the second floor. The fact that there aren't even any beds here probably means that this isn't where they sleep… Like I thought, there's a secret passage and they live on the other side."

"About that secret passage, did you manage to find it? I doubt that it would be on the second floor."

"No, I couldn't find anything like that. Like you said, it's probably the first floor."

Climb and Brain looked at one another and searched the interior. Climb didn't have any thief skills and could not find anything by simply searching the area. If they could take their time and had fine powder like flour with them, they could have scattered them over the area and blown on it. The powder would have fallen into the cracks of the secret entrance and made it easier to find.

However, they had neither the flour nor the time to spare. Climb took out a magic item from his pouch. It was a set of small hand bells given to him by Gagaran of Blue Rose. *"Even if it's dangerous to go adventuring without a thief, there'll be times when you won't have a choice. When that happens, this'll make a world of difference."* That was what she said when she gave him this item. Climb compared the pictures drawn on the side of the three bells and picked out the one he wanted.

The name of the magic item that he had taken out was 'Bell of Detect Secret Doors'. He could feel Brain looking at him curiously as he shook it once. A refreshing tone rang out, a sound that only the user could hear. In response, a pale light gathered at a section of the floor. The light flickered

repeatedly, indicating the location of the secret door. “Hoh, that’s a convenient item. All of mine are only for strengthening myself and things useful in battle.”

“But is that not obvious for a warrior?”

“A warrior huh…”

Having memorized that spot, Climb separated from Brain who was wearing a bitter smile and circled around the first floor once. The magical effects of this item had a time limit. It was necessary to investigate as many places as possible before the time was up. Although he did a lap around the floor, aside from the first, there were no other areas that reacted to the magic.

Their next course of action was to infiltrate through this door. However, Climb narrowed his eyes and stared at the secret entrance. He then breathed a sigh and again, took out the set of three hand bells. The one he chose this time had a different picture than the one before it. And like before, he shook it. A sound that was similar yet different from the other rang out.

‘Bell of Remove Trap.’ Be cautious of your surroundings. As a warrior, Climb had neither the ability to detect traps nor a way to handle them should he fall into one. If they had a magic caster, then even if he were to get hit with a paralyzing poison, he could be treated. However, there were only two warriors here. Among martial arts, ones that nullified poisons did exist.

However, Climb had not learned them and didn’t have an antidote with him either. He had to assume that he would be doomed if he fell into one. That was why he had to use an item with a limited number of uses per day without hesitation. A heavy click sounded from the secret door. Climb stuck his sword between the edges of the door and forced it open.

The bent side of the wooden floor sprang up and fell to the other side. A crossbow had been set inside the secret entrance. Light reflected oddly off of the tip of its quarrel. Climb changed his position and stared at the crossbow. The tip was covered in some viscous liquid. The odds were ten to one that it was poison. If they had tried to open it carelessly, it would have fired the quarrel dipped in poison.

With a small breath of relief, he looked for a way to get rid of the crossbow. Unfortunately, it was set quite firm and it did not seem like he would be able to disarm it without tools. Having given up, Climb peered into what was through the secret door. A steep set of stairs led downwards and he could not see anything beyond it due to the angle. Both the stairs and areas around it were packed with stones, making it seem very sturdy.

“So, what’re you going to do? Are you going to wait here?”

“It’s a bit difficult for me to fight indoors. If possible, I would like to go and find a place that’s wide and easy to fight in and attack their position there.

“Considering a 1v1 situation, you’d have a higher chance of winning if you waited at the top of the stairs. But if there’s a battle, there’s a chance that I would be too far ahead to hear it… And since reinforcements might come running, we should definitely forget about that idea. Then let’s go together.”

“Yes. I leave myself in your care.”

“I’ll lead the way. Follow a bit further behind me.”

“Understood. And although the item that I used a moment ago to clear the trap can be used three times per day, it can’t be used consecutively and need a thirty-minute interval between uses. We can’t rely on the item.”

“Got it. I’ll advance with the utmost caution. And if you detect something then give me a shout.” After saying that, Brain moved to the front and walked down the stairs. Just in case, he advanced one step at a time while prodding the ground in front of him with his katana. Climb followed him from behind.

At the bottom of the stairway, the ground and even the walls were lined with hard rocks. A few meters ahead, they saw a wooden door with its edges reinforced with steel. Although it was difficult to imagine that they would place a trap at the level of the crossbow in the passage with the emergency exit, it was common for heavily armed warriors to be incapacitated by a single floor trap. That had to be avoided at all costs.

Despite the short distance, Brain advanced carefully and took his time reaching the door. Climb was on standby at the bottom of the stairs. He did so to avoid being dragged into any accidents should they occur. Brain first poked the door with his sword. After repeating this several times, he grabbed the doorknob— and twisted it. His movements then stopped.

As he worried over what might have happened, Brain turned to him and spoke with a plaintive voice. “…It’s locked.” Of course. A door would be locked. “Ah, I have something. One moment.” He rang the last of the three hand bells at the door. With the power of ‘Bell of Open Lock’, the faint sound of a key unlocking the door could be heard.

Brain turned the knob and opened the door slightly, searching for a presence from within. “No one’s there. I’ll go in first.” Climb followed behind Brain and broke in as well. They were in a hall. In one corner of the room, there was a cage that was large enough to fit a person. Countless number of wooden crates was stacked up against the wall. Was this where they stored the luggage? Even so, it still seemed a bit too spacious.

There was a door with no key on the opposite side. When Climb listened carefully, he heard a faint noise, as if there was a commotion in the distance. Brain turned around and asked Climb. “What about here? It’s certainly big enough, but… you’re probably going to end up having to fight several people at once.”

“If that becomes the case, I will open the door leading to the exit and fight at the stairs.”

“Alright. I’ll take a quick look around and be back soon. So don’t die, Climb.”

“Good luck. Brain-sama as well, be careful.”

“If you don’t mind… could you let me borrow that item from before?”

“Of course. I apologize for not having thought of that.” Climb handed all three bells over to Brain who put them into his belt pouch. He then wore the determined face of a warrior. “Then I’ll be going.” Leaving only those words, Brain went through the keyless door and moved deeper into the brothel.

Now that he was alone, Climb looked around the quiet interior. First, he checked to see if anyone was behind the crates and whether there were any other passages. Although it was the searching skills of a warrior at best, there did not appear to be any hidden doors. He then investigated the vast number of wooden crates.

If possible, he wanted to find information on Eight Fingers' facilities other than this one. It would be great if there were contrabands or illegal goods. Of course, the real search would have to wait until after this place was taken over. But he had to conduct his own investigation within the scope of what he was capable.

Among the countless crates, both large and small, he approached the largest of them all. Its length, width, and all, everything was about two meters tall. He checked the large crate for any possible traps. Needless to say, it was the same as before. He had no skills of observation and could not imitate the skills of a thief.

He pressed his ear up against it and listened. Although it didn't seem like something was locked inside, in a place like the underworld, anything could happen. They could even be smuggling illegal creatures. In a way, maybe it was to be expected that he didn't hear any noises. Climb then placed his hand on top to try and open it.

It's not opening. It did not budge. He looked around for something like a plank or a stick but a quick look revealed that there were none. "…No choice then." Next, he moved over to try and open the next biggest crate measuring about a meter on all sides. This one opened easily. Peering inside, there was a variety of garments. Starting from a shabby one-piece, there were even a number of clothes a noble's daughter would wear.

"What is this? Is there something hidden beneath these… it doesn't appear that way. Are these spare clothes? Some of these look like work clothes, and this is a maid outfit? What in the world?"

Climb could not understand what all these clothes meant and twisted his face. He held one in his hand but it was normal clothing. If these were related to a crime, then they would be stolen goods. However, it was not enough as evidence for bringing down this brothel. Leaving the stuff that he didn't understand alone, Climb headed for a crate that was a similar size to the one before. That was when he heard a loud rattle fill the room.

That was impossible. He had checked the entire room and confirmed that no one was here. At that moment, a thought flashed across his mind. Someone could have used 'Invisibility' to hide themselves here from the beginning. Climb was startled by the thought and hastily turned in the direction of the noise, the 2-meter crate that did not open. One of the sides of that crate had been up against the wall, and the opposite side was now open.

There was no luggage inside the exposed interior. Instead, there were two men. The inside was a passage and there was a hole where the wall should have been. The inside of the crate had been connected to a secret tunnel. While Climb blinked, the men stepped out of the crate one at a time. Cold sweat ran down his back.

The appearance of one of the men closely resembled the description that he had heard from Sebas. His name was Succulent, the one who was considered to be their biggest obstacle in this attack and at the same time, the one they wanted to capture the most. He was a member of 'Six Arms' who

was said to be equal to adamantite ranked adventurers. The enemy that Climb could not hope to defeat drew his blade and spoke while narrowing his eyes.

"I knew that there were intruders from 'Alarm' so I went out of my way to take the secret passage but… …Maybe you should have prepared more paths, after all?" The man behind him responded in a shrill voice. "Even if you say that now, I can't do anything about it." Meanwhile, the man saw Climb and spoke while tilting his head. "Huh? I saw that kid from somewhere."

"A boy that you're familiar with? Even I will get angry if you say something like that in this situation."

"What's with you, Succulent? There's no way that that's what I'm talking about. No doubt, he's a subordinate of that female I hate the most in the world."

"You're saying that he's a subordinate of that princess?" Succulent looked over Climb from top to bottom like he was licking him all over. Although the eyes of the man behind him, frighteningly enough, were filling with lust, his eyes seemed to be trying to gauge Climb's abilities as a warrior. They were like the eyes of a snake trying to determine if the prey would fit inside his mouth.

The man behind him licked his lips with his tongue and asked Succulent. "I want to take him with me, can I?" A shiver ran down Climb's back and he felt an itch in his butt. *That bastard, he swings that way!*

"I will require additional fees." Succulent ignored the screams of Climb's mind and turned to face him. Although Climb could not spot any openings in the first place, he was ensnared by the feeling that he was facing off against a strong citadel. Succulent abruptly moved a step forward. The pressure forced Climb to retreat a step back. Without a doubt, it would not take long for a fight where the difference in skill was clear to finish. However, Climb had to overcome that difficult crisis.

If I maintain my defenses and focus on blocking, then I will be able to buy time until either Brain-sama or Sebas-sama arrives. But there was something that he had to do before that. Climb drew in a big breath. "Please help me—!!" He shouted in a voice loud enough to force all the air out of his lungs.

Winning the individual battle was not victory. They would only be victorious if they tied up the men here so that they could not run away. Another way to put it would be that if they let a man of his skill— and by extension, a man who seemed to possess a lot of information get away, then that would mean their defeat. If so, there would be no reason for him to hesitate to shout for help.

Succulent's face turned savage. The other side was now pressured by the need to finish this fight as quickly as possible. In other words, there was a considerably higher chance that he would mainly use bigger skills. Climb did not let his guard down and observed them.

"Cocco Doll-sama, it's become a bit more difficult to take this guy with us. It looks like I have to finish this fight before his reinforcements come."

"What the hell! Didn't you say that you're a member of the Six Arms? You can't knock out a kid like him? You're making your name cry, Devil of Illusions!"

"If you say it like that, then you're putting me in a difficult position. Well, I'll do my best but don't forget that our victory lies in Cocco Doll-sama getting out of here safely."

Climb maintained vigilance and glared at Succulent as he tried to figure out why he was called the Devil of Illusions. He wouldn't get a nickname if it was completely at odds with his abilities. As such, if he could find its origin, then he could read at least a sliver of his opponent's abilities. But unfortunately, he couldn't tell anything from the man's appearance or his equipment.

Even though he knew that he was at a disadvantage, Climb yelled to encourage himself. "I am guarding this door. While I still stand, I will not allow you to escape!"

"We'll know if that's possible soon enough. When you fall pathetically to the floor, that is." Succulent slowly raised his sword.

Hmm?! Climb doubted his eyes. The sword was swaying. His eyes were not mistaken. Although that strange phenomenon quickly subsided, he had seen it clearly. Some martial art—? It probably had something to do with the reason he was called the Devil of Illusions. If so, it meant that his opponent had activated some power. Although he hadn't let down his guard, he now had to be even more cautious.

Succulent closed in on him while raising his sword. It could not be said to be the movements of someone who rivaled adamantite ranked adventurers. Rather, looking at his movements alone, it fell slightly short to Climb. He raised his sword to match the path of the swing and— felt a shiver that caused him to quickly retreat back.

At that instant, he felt a sharp pain in his side and was almost knocked away. "Ugh!" He staggered back just like that against the wall. He did not have the luxury to think about what just happened. Succulent was already in front of him. His sword was raised like before. Climb raised his sword to protect his head and leapt towards his left side as if he was rolling headfirst.

Pain ran down his upper right arm. He rolled using the momentum and as soon as he stood up, swung his sword without even looking. The sword cut through air. He realized that his opponent had no intention of giving chase and looked around while pressing down on his right arm. He saw Succulent run towards the door leading to the stairs while being wary of him.

Climb ignored Succulent who was about to open the door and directed his gaze at Cocco Doll. He deemed that if Succulent was in charge of Cocco Doll's protection, this would be enough to keep him in check. His prediction was correct. Succulent's hand stopped abruptly. He then placed himself between Climb and Cocco Doll and clicked his tongue. His eyes moved to the door, Climb, and Cocco Doll in that order and his face grew twisted. "He got me! I apologize but I'll have to kill this brat right here."

"What~? If we keep him alive then he'll be a good card to use against that bitch."

"I was mistaken because of him. I focused on the fact that he was guarding the door and… that was the reason why he babbled about guarding the door. This bastard… toying with me."

…Alright, he fell for it! As I thought, they don't seem to have any information about what's happening outside. Now they won't be able to run. In a situation where Succulent was the only bodyguard, it was

a foolish idea to run while leaving Climb alive and able to continue fighting. The reason was because they would be hit with a pincer attack should one of Climb's allies be at the top of the stairs. For the same reason, he also couldn't let Cocco Doll escape alone before he finished the battle with Climb.

Climb separating himself from the door after announcing that he would guard it and showing signs that he was aiming for Cocco Doll caused Succulent to fall for his bluff. He was now deeply entrenched in the thought that someone was on standby beyond the door and that they would use a pincer attack to capture Cocco doll alive. In order to escape safely, he should have determined that he had to first defeat Climb here.

Of course, this was because he did not know the situation outside. If he did, he would have simply opened the door and fled. Having won his gamble, Climb received the rising killing intent and raised his sword. "Haa…"

Climb endured the pain being transmitted from his side and upper right arm. Several of his bones might have been broken but he was lucky to still be able to move. No, if that pervert did not harbor any weird lust towards him, then Climb might have died to a single stroke of the sword. Even though he was wearing a chain shirt, it didn't protect him from the slash completely

But what was that attack? Did he slash with an incredible speed? But it didn't seem that way… Gazef's face rose to Climb's mind. Gazef Stronoff's original martial art, 'Six-fold Slash of Light', was said to deliver six attacks at once. If so, perhaps he was using something similar, but not quite as powerful, a 'Twofold Slash of Light'.

However, that meant that Succulent was using a bizarre technique where the first attack was normal speed and only the second attack was fast. *It doesn't connect. I'd be able to deal with it somehow if I knew what kind of technique it was but… anyways, it's dangerous to be on the defensive. Should I attack?* Climb swallowed his saliva and ran in. His eyes switched from Succulent over to Cocco Doll, causing Succulent's face to twist greatly.

A bodyguard won't like it if you go for their target, even if it's only a threat. I know that from experience. Approach while doing everything that he himself would not enjoy. *Devil of Illusions; a devil that uses illusions… there's a chance that the nickname itself is a deception but… it's worth checking.*

He brought down his sword while closing the distance. But as expected, it was easily repelled. He endured the impact that was being transmitted and swung again. It was not an attack that was raised high so there was no strength in it. Regardless, it was enough. As his broadsword was again deflected by Succulent's sword, Climb nodded his head in satisfaction and widened the distance.

"An illusion! It's not a martial art!" He felt that something was out of place when his sword was repelled. Rather than the weapon he could see with his eyes, he had felt his sword being deflected by something slightly in front of it. "Your right arm itself is an illusion. Your real arm and your sword is invisible!"

The sword that he thought he blocked was an illusion and the invisible blade was what slashed his body. Succulent erased all expressions on his face and began to talk in a flat voice. "…That's right. I just combined a spell that made a part of the body invisible with illusion magic since I chose

classes in Illusionist and Fencer. Now that you know, it's a boring trick, right? You can laugh if you want."

Just how could he laugh? Without a doubt, it sounded incredibly simple when said out loud and even made one wonder how they didn't notice it before. However, in a battle where a single slash could mean your death, there was nothing more frightening than a sword that you could not see. And the fact that the illusion was visible on top of that made it that much easier to forget about it.

"My strength purely as a warrior might be less than yours since my skills are split, but…" Succulent turned his hand holding the sword with a flick. But was that truly his real arm? There was a chance that the arm he could see was an illusion and that his real hand was holding a dagger while looking for an opportunity to throw it.

Cold sweat trailed down Climb's body as he realized the terror of illusions. "Among magic casters, an illusionist can only use illusion spells. The higher tiers have damage spells that attack with illusions and kill by tricking the brain, however… I have yet to reach that level."

"That sounds like a lie. Where's your proof?"

"I guess you're right." Succulent spoke with a smile. "Well, but there's no reason for you to believe me. So, hmm, what was I going to say… right. As such, I can't cast any spells to strengthen myself or weaken you. However… will you be able to tell the difference between illusion and reality?"

As soon as his words ended, Succulent's body became divided and it looked as if several Succulents were overlapping. "「Multiple Vision」." Although it seemed like one of them would be the real body, there was no guarantee that that was true.

Why did I give a magic caster time! Climb's objective was to buy time, but giving a magic caster time to cast buffs was incredibly dangerous. With a roar, Climb activated the 'Ability Boost' and the 'Strengthen Perception' martial arts and closed the distance to Succulent in one breath.

"「Scintillating Scotoma」."

"Ugh!" Climb felt a portion of his vision fade away. However, the effect disappeared immediately. It seems his magic resist had succeeded. Having endured with his feet planted, Climb swung his sword like he was trying to slash through all of the clones. But only one of them was within the reach of his swing. As expected, if he wanted to hit all of them, he had to engage the original. Otherwise, there would be no strength in his sword.

The Succulent that got hit was cut in two. However, there was no blood and the sword passed through him without resistance. "—Wrong." A chill rose from his guts and the area around his neck grew hot. Climb covered the area where he felt the heat with his left hand.

He felt a sharp pain from the hand covering his neck and the ominous sensation of his clothes being dyed in fresh blood. If he had not sensed his bloodlust, if he had hesitated to sacrifice his hand, his neck would have been severed. Relieved to have escaped death, he gritted his teeth to endure the pain and slashed his sword horizontally. Again, the sword only cut air with no resistance.

Anymore was dangerous. Having realized this, Climb used 'Evasion' and retreated back. His eyes reflected the image of two Succulents simultaneously raising their swords. Climb knew that all the swords were illusions and focused his ears. The chain shirt he wore and the beating of his heart sounded noisy in his ears. The only thing that he had to listen to was the sound coming from the man before him.

—No. —No. —This one! The noise was not coming from the sword that was heading towards him. The faint sound of a blade cutting through air came from the empty space in front of him. It was heading for the middle of Climb's face. Climb hastily turned his face and— felt heat graze past his cheek as well as the pain of his flesh being slashed open. Hot liquid spilled from his cheek and flowed down his neck.

"One in two chances!" Climb spit out the blood that was trailing into his mouth and poured everything he had into this attack. Because he had used it for earlier to shield himself, he could feel nothing but pain below his left wrist. He wasn't sure if his fingers could move properly. It was even possible that the nerves were severed. But even if he could only hold on to it, Climb grasped the handle of his sword.

The pain exploded and caused him to grit his teeth. However, his left hand moved properly and he could grip the sword's handle. Perhaps the pain was the reason his hand felt like a swollen balloon. He firmly gripped it with both hands and brought down his sword from overhead with as much strength as he could muster.

Blood— sprouted. Along with the sensation of cutting through something hard, blood erupted like a fountain. It seemed that he had managed to hit the real one this time. Succulent fell to the floor like he had been stabbed in the vitals. Although it was hard to believe that he had won against a man who was as skilled as adamantite ranked adventurers, the fact that he had collapsed was the undeniable truth. Climb forced down his rising joy and turned his eyes to Cocco doll who was quietly looking in his direction. He didn't seem to have any intention of fleeing.

Perhaps because he lost a bit of his tension, the flaring pain from his cheek and left arm made him nauseous. "This… can't be called a complete victory." Although it would have been ideal to capture Succulent alive, that was impossible for Climb. Even so, they should be able to get a lot of information if they capture the man that the Six Arms were protecting and helping to escape.

Climb stepped forward to capture him but felt something out of place with Cocco Doll's expression. He was too calm. What was the basis for that composure? At that moment, he felt a hot sensation stab through his stomach. As if his strings had been cut, strength left his body. For an instant, his vision turned pitch black and when he came to; he was lying on the floor. He could not understand what had happened. It felt like a hot, metal rod was lodged in his stomach. The pain spread and made him violently expel the air in his lungs. A foot entered his vision that could only see the floor.

"Unfortunately, it seems you can't call this a victory at all." He desperately raised his face and saw Succulent who was almost completely unharmed. "'Fox Sleep'. It's an illusion that I can activate after receiving an injury. It hurt, you know. You probably thought that you killed me, right?" He moved his fingers and slowly traced a straight line across his waist. It was probably the path of Climb's sword.

“Haa. Haa. Haa. Haa.” His breaths were short and rough. Climb could feel the blood sprouting from his stomach stain his chain shirt and clothes alike. He was going to die. Climb desperately clung onto his fading consciousness that seemed like it would be torn away by the tremendous pain. Losing consciousness here meant certain death.

However, even if he stayed awake, it was only a matter of time. Succulent will probably come over to personally finish him off. He fought well, considering that he was up against a man at the level of adamantite ranked adventurers. Since it ended up like this, he had no choice but to resign himself to his fate. The difference in strength was clear. However— he could not give up.

How could he? Climb gritted his teeth as if he was trying to shatter them. He could not accept death. He could not allow himself to die without Renner’s orders. “Ku, guh! Ugh, urk.” With the sound of grinding teeth and a forceful shout that was more like a groan, he filled his heart with anger, the heart that was about to cave to the pain. He could not die just yet. He could not die. Climb desperately thought of Renner. Today as well, he wanted to return to her side—

“There isn’t much time so I’ll just finish you off. Die.” Succulent pointed his sword at the boy who was groaning. It was a fatal injury; his death was only a matter of time. However, he had a hunch that it would be better for him to kill him here. “…Um, can’t we take him with us?”

“Cocco Doll-san, please give it a rest. There’s a good chance that this brat’s allies are through that door. And even if we do take him with us, he’s probably just going to die before we get to someplace safe. Please just give it up.”

“Then at the very least, let’s take his head. I’m going to send it to that bitch with some flowers.”

“Yes, yes. If it’s only that much… huh?!” Succulent leapt back. The boy had swung his sword. For a boy who was almost dead, the cut was sharp and steady. As Succulent was about to give a look of disdain at the last-ditch resistance of his pitiful prey, his eyes grew wide.

The boy was rising to his feet by using the sword as a crutch. That was impossible. Succulent, who had killed in numbers that could not be counted in the hundreds, was certain that his attack from a moment ago was fatal. It was a wound that you could never get up from. But the scene before his eyes too easily betrayed the knowledge that he had built up from experience.

“H-how is he standing up?” He felt goose bumps. He was truly like an undead. With a long string of saliva trailing down his mouth, the boy’s pale face could only be described as someone who had thrown away his humanity.

“I… can’t… die… yet. Not… before… re…pay… ner-sama… kind…ness.” For an instant, his breath stopped in his throat when the boy’s eerie eyes turned to him. That was terror. He was scared of the boy who had done the impossible. Seeing how the boy staggered on his feet, Succulent came back to his senses. What seized him then was shame. For a member of Six Arms to be afraid of someone who was so far beneath him, he couldn’t accept it.

“You half-dead bastard! Die!” Succulent charged forward. He was certain that the boy would die if he stabbed him. But he had been too arrogant. Looking at them as a whole, there was no doubt that there was an overwhelming difference between Climb and Succulent.

But Succulent who had two classes in Illusionist and Fencer and Climb who was only trained in the Warrior class, when comparing the two from a warrior's perspective, there was not that big of a difference. Rather, Climb would be above him. The only reason that Climb was weaker than Succulent was because of the existence of magic. In a situation where he wasn't strengthened by magic, Succulent was the weaker one.

With the sound of cutting through air, the sword shot up high and the high pitched noise of clashing metal rang out. The reason that he was able to block the boy's overhead strike was because his body was close to dying and his movements were dulled. Cold sweat ran down Succulent's face. He had been too focused on the fact that his opponent was almost dead. This preconceived notion was completely blown away.

As a Fencer, Succulent who was trained on how to evade the enemy's attacks, had used his sword to defend himself. That was how far past the norm the boy's attack had been. That wasn't an attack that could be done by a half-dead human. This thought brushed past Succulent's anxious mind. No, the speed of his sword was even faster than before he was injured.

"Bastard, what's with you?!" To become stronger in the middle of a battle. Thought it wasn't impossible, Succulent had never seen something like that in reality. Rather, it felt as if he had shed a layer of something. "What the hell is going on?! Is it a magic item? A martial art?" His panicked voice sounded desperate, so much so that it was hard to tell which side had the upper hand.

What happened to Climb was simple. Thanks to Sebas' training, the function in his brain that protected the body was thrown into disarray. He had experienced death during Sebas' training. His tenacity for life overlapped with the death he now faced and like back then, the limiters in his brain were released, granting him superhuman strength similar to the one that was sometimes displayed at the scene of a fire. Although he had only seen a single blow during his training, without it, he would have died here without being able to do anything.

Succulent blocked a powerful blow and was suddenly blown back a great distance. The impact from being dashed against the ground escaped through his back and shook his stomach. Although the orichalcum chain shirt blocked the impact, for an instant, the air in his lungs was expelled and he could not breathe.

What happened? Even though Succulent, the one who had received the impact, could not figure it out, it was obvious to Cocco Doll who had been watching from the sidelines. He had kicked him with his leg. As soon as the overhead slash was blocked, the boy had immediately delivered a kick to Succulent.

Unable to understand what had happened, Succulent hastily got back on his feet. For fencers, being nimble was their creed. Lying sprawled out on the ground was fatal. "Damn it! This bastard doesn't act like a soldier! To think you would even use your feet! You need to just stick to textbook swordsmanship!" Succulent rolled on the floor while quickly getting back up and with the sound of clicking his tongue, he poured out his criticisms.

It was a style that was different from what the soldiers trained in. It was dirtier; it felt like he was facing off against an adventurer. That was why he couldn't let down his guard. A feeling of anxiety ran down Succulent's back. At first, he thought that he would win easily, that he could quickly finish off a brat like this. However, now he could feel that composure start to disappear.

Succulent drew in his breath as he saw how the boy who he deemed dangerous was slowly weakening. His complexion looked as if their previous series of clashes had burned out the flame of his life. No, that was probably the truth. Like how a candle burns brightly just before it goes out, that power was the same.

Now, he will really die even if he were to simply touch him. Succulent felt a tiny relief and after a moment of hesitation, was dominated by anger. He was angry at the fact that as one of the Six Arms, he had this much trouble with a single soldier. Also at himself for thinking it was dangerous. However, the fight was decided. He just had to kill him and run. However—

"That's enough." He had just barely made it on time. Climb who was lying on the ground, his face was a mess of dirt and sweat. It had gone past the point of turning blue and was now completely pale. Even so, he was still alive. But being stabbed through the stomach was fatal and if he was not treated immediately, he would die in a matter of minutes.

Brain entered the room, unable to feel relieved. Inside, there were two men. One of them didn't seem to be a combatant. "Can't you just kill the kid quickly without paying attention to that suspicious guy over there?"

"If I do then that man will close the distance in an instant and blow me away with a single slash. He's on a whole different level compared to this brat. I won't be able to win unless I concentrate and fight with everything I have. If I let my guard down even slightly or let my mind wander, it'll be over."

Then the one who just answered must be Succulent. That's how Brain understood it. It was clear that he closely resembled the description. Honestly, that was what he thought back when he saw him with a clone and holding a bloody dagger. But he was done confirming it.

Brain stomped over without a word and half-heartedly used a draw slash. Succulent retreated back with a leap and the katana sliced through thin air. But Brain had only attacked with the intention to separate the enemy from Climb. He stepped over the collapsed Climb and stopped his feet at where he could cover for him.

"Climb, you okay? Do you have any items that can heal injuries?" He did not have the luxury of time and thus spoke quickly. If there was nothing to treat him with, they would have to quickly find another way. "Haa, haa, haa, haa. I… do." He glanced over and saw that Climb had put down his sword and was moving his hand.

"I see." Brain replied with a deep sense of relief and looked at Succulent with a penetrating stare. "I'll be your opponent from now on. I'm going to have to take revenge for this guy."

"…No wonder you seem confident. You have a katana, an expensive weapon that rarely travels up from the south. I've never heard that a warrior like you was in the Kingdom… Mind if I ask for your name?"

He had no intention of answering him. Climb was someone who he shared a common objective with— his comrade. In a situation where that comrade might die, he didn't have time to go back and forth with questions and… All of a sudden, Brain asked himself.

Is this me? Didn't he throw away everything that did not involve improving his skill with the sword? As Brain was about to slightly tilt his chin, he let out a quiet laugh. *…Ahh, I see now.* His heart, his dream, his goal, his path in life, what made life worth living, all of it had been destroyed by that monster, Shalltear Bloodfallen.

And the one who found a place in its cracks was Climb. When he himself broke under the savage bloodlust of the mysterious figure named Sebas, the figure of Climb enduring despite being weak won Brain's respect and admiration. He saw the resplendence of a man who possessed what he did not. While he stood in front of Climb, he and Succulent stared each other down. Seeing him like this, could Climb see the same brilliance that Brain had seen from his back?

If his past self were to see this situation, he would have laughed until tears came from his eyes, saying that he got weaker. He had thought that a warrior grew weaker if he had to shoulder something. He used to think that the only thing a warrior needed was sharpness. However— now he understood. "So this kind of life existed as well… I see now. Gazef… it seems that I'm still no match for you."

"Didn't you hear me? Mind if I ask again? Your name is?"

"Sorry about that. I don't think there would be any meaning in telling you but I'll answer… It's Brain Unglaus."

Succulent's eyes opened wide. "What! You?!"

"Oh my! The real thing?! He's not a fake?!"

"No, there's no doubt, Cocco Doll-san. An expensive weapon reveals a warrior's worth. For the Brain Unglaus that I know of, a katana would be a fitting weapon." Brain smiled bitterly. "Most of the people that I meet for the first time today seem to know about me… if this was the past then I would've been happy but I'm not really sure how I feel about it now."

Succulent's smile suddenly turned friendly. Brain was puzzled but his confusion was immediately lifted. "Listen, Unglaus! What do you say we stop fighting? Someone like you is more than qualified to become our comrade. How about you join us? If it's you, I can tell just by looking that you're strong enough to become a member of Six Arms. You're the same as us. Aren't you seeking power? That's what your eyes tell me."

"…You're not wrong."

"Then Eight Fingers will be pretty good for you. It's the greatest organization for those with strength! You can get magic items with powerful abilities. Look at this orichalcum chain shirt! This mithril sword! Ring! Clothes! Boots! They're all magic items! Now, Brain Unglaus, become our comrade. Like me, you'll be a member of Six Arms."

"…How boring. That's all your gang amounts to?" His unbelievably cold attitude filled with contempt froze Succulent's face solid. "What?"

"Didn't you hear me? I said that your gang with only that much power is nothing special."

"Y-You bastard! …H-Hmph. Then that must mean you're not so strong yourself!"

“You’re quite right. After seeing a truly strong monster, someone like me is nothing.” Brain took pity on the frog in a small pond who believed that he was strong and gave him an honest, friendly warning. “The strength that you speak of is the same. We’re probably speaking about similar things so let me give you a warning. Even if we claim that we’re strong, we’re nothing special.”

Brain looked over his shoulder and confirmed that Climb had finished drinking his potion. “And there’s something that I’ve come to understand. Strength that is for the sake of others is greater than strength that is only for your own sake.” Brain smiled. It was a friendly, light hearted smile. “The difference might be tiny. But I still came to realize it.”

“I don’t understand a word you’re saying. …It’s a pity, Unglaus. It’s a pity that I have to kill that genius swordsman who was Stronoff’s equal.”

“You? Do you think that you who only wield your sword for yourself could kill me?”

“Of course I can kill you, quite easily, in fact. I’ll kill you, and then I’ll kill that brat lying down over there. There’s no more reason for me to hold back and I won’t play around either. I’ll come with everything I have.” While keeping Succulent who started to prepare his magic in his line of sight, he sensed the presence of the one behind him begin to move and sent out a warning. “Stay still, Climb. You’re not fully recovered yet, right?”

Twitch. The movement stopped. Brain wore a smile and spoke, despite feeling the same surprise that he felt a moment ago at this side of himself. “Let me take care of the rest.”

“I leave it to you.”

Rather than reply, Brain laughed and sheathed his katana as he lowered his stance. At the same time, he flipped the katana, sheath and all, so that its top and bottom side were switched. “Be careful. Succulent uses illusions. Just because you can see it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s real.”

“Oh, so that’s it… That seems like an annoying opponent but… it won’t be a problem.” Brain silently watched Succulent without moving. He must have finished casting his spells, for the number of his afterimages had increased to five. Not only that, he was wearing a mantle that looked as if it was made of shadows. He could not even begin to guess as to what sort of spells he cast on it.

“Thanks for giving me time to prepare. A magic caster with enough time becomes stronger than even a warrior. You defeat is certain, Unglaus!”

“Right, don’t worry about it. It’s the same for me. After talking with my friend here… I don’t think I could ever lose.” *Crunch*. He heard the sound of Climb, who had been lying prone on the floor, moving. He was regretting the fact that because of him, they had allowed the enemy to cast buffs. That was why Brain made his announcement so that Climb could clearly hear it. “One hit.”

“What?!”

“I said that I’ll end this in one hit, Succulent.”

"Try it if you can!" Succulent ran towards him with his afterimages. As he entered the range of his katana, Brain turned his body so that his calm and defenseless back was exposed to the charging Succulent. And— his 'God Speed Slash' flew towards empty space, right next to Climb.

Smack. That sound rang out and the walls shook. Both Cocco Doll and Climb looked in the direction of where that sound had come from. There, Succulent's body was collapsed on the floor and did not budge. A sword was rolling on the ground near him. Brain's draw slash had blown back Succulent's body and it had crashed into the wall at unbelievable speed. If he had not used the back of his blade, even with the orichalcum chain shirt, Succulent's body would have been in two pieces. That's how much power was behind that attack.

"…My 'Field' can detect your presence even if I can't see you with my eyes. To think that you would use an auditory illusion to try and focus my attention to the front so you can attack from behind… It was a great trick, but too bad your opponent was me. And going for Climb was also foolish. You were probably planning to kill him and babble about how I couldn't protect him and what not, but you focused too much of your attention on trying to attack Climb who was on the floor. Did you forget who you're facing?" Brain sheathed his katana and smiled at Climb. "See, one hit, right?"

"That was splendid!" His voice was overlapped by another voice that also said "That was incredible." The two were shocked. The voice they heard belonged to Sebas, but that by itself was nothing to be surprised about. What shocked them was the direction that the voice came from.

The two turned their eyes in Cocco Doll's direction. There, they saw Sebas. Cocco Doll was collapsed next to him. "When did you arrive?" Sebas calmly replied to Brain's question. "I just arrived. It seems everyone's attention was focused on Succulent and did not notice me."

"I-I see." Even as he answered, Brain didn't think that was possible. *But I had my 'Field' up. Its range is narrow but it should still catch anyone who ran in a straight line. And I still couldn't sense him…? The only one who's capable of moving like that until now was that monster, Shalltear Bloodfallen. I've thought this when I got hit with his bloodlust, but is he on the same level as that monster? Just who is he?*

"Regardless, I have rescued everyone who was taken captive. And I must apologize to Climb-kun, several of the guards fought back so fiercely that I had no choice but to kill them. Please forgive me… or so I'd like to say. It seems that before I apologize, it would better for me to treat your wounds."

Sebas walked up next to Climb and touched his stomach with his hand. He very briefly held his hand lightly against his stomach and immediately retracted it. But the effect was dramatic. Climb's face that had been pale even after he drank the potion had immediately regained its healthy complexion.

"My stomach's healed…! You were a priest?"

"No, I did not use the power of God, but rather poured in my Qi to treat you."

"So you were a monk! No wonder, I finally understand." Brain nodded his head, now he understood why he didn't have any weapons or armor. Sebas showed a smile of affirmation. "Then what will the two of you do from now on?"

"First, I plan to run to the guard office to explain what happened here and bring some soldiers back. Meanwhile, I would like to ask Sebas-sama and Brain-sama to keep watch here. However, Eight Fingers might send reinforcements."

"…I'm already on board this ship. I'll ride it out 'til the end."

"I do not mind either. However, could you keep me and my matters a secret? I only came to this country for business and do not wish to involve myself any further with the darkness of a foreign land."

"I don't care either way, Climb. Well, know that my guarantor is Stronoff for now so I'll leave it to you."

"I see. I understand. Then to you both, I apologize but please give me some time."

Part 3

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 19:05

As night began to fall on the Kingdom, Climb finally returned to the palace. Although his injuries were completely healed, his body was tired. Not just the battle, he had to mediate several times to handle the aftermath and those took time. The reason it had worked out in the end was not because Climb was Renner's bodyguard, but because the guards feared the Eight Fingers and remained passive. What was especially significant was the problem of responsibility.

The one responsible would be made an example of and murdered by the Eight Fingers— it was a not a groundless worry. There was a high possibility of it actually happening. That was why he ordered a soldier to deliver to Renner a document containing a brief account of the situation. He then received permission to write down his name and the name of his master as the ones responsible.

Even though it would obviously have its share of disadvantages, there were at least two benefits. One was obvious; it would raise Renner's reputation. They were the organization that was dirtying the Kingdom. And not only that, she exposed the people who committed filthy acts while being involved with the slave trade. Even better, for Renner who does not step outside the palace, the fact that she sent her bodyguard to the front would raise her evaluation.

Next were Sebas and the fact that they could protect the girl that he was sheltering. If they became the ones responsible, they could hide her since she was trying to not stand out. And once that was done, it would be difficult for them to become Eight Finger's primary targets.

I couldn't be of much help when we charged in so I have to do at least this much… Brain said that he was going to deliver the news to Gazef personally and told him to not worry about it. Climb absent-mindedly pondered such thoughts as he knocked on Renner's door.

Normally, he could just enter without having to knock. But he declined to do so when it was late, thinking that it would be rude after all. After that one time when he encountered a Renner who was only wearing a thin silk dress, even his master consented to him on that point.

Climb smelled himself before he could hear the answer. Even though he had washed, his nose was used to the smell and he wasn't confident whether or not the smell of blood was gone from his body. There was just no way that his attire was good enough to enter the room of a princess. However, it was necessary that he promptly report today's events with his own mouth.

More than anything, the people who had been held captive were the most important. For now, those women had been entrusted with the station, but they would have to be moved to a safe location in the near future. And since some of them were hurt, they would have to send someone like a priest who could use healing magic.

The kind-hearted Renner-sama will definitely extend a helping hand to the suffering citizens. It pained him to cause all these troubles for his master. If only he were a bit stronger… he ended up not knowing his place and wished for something like that. Even when it was all thanks to her that he could serve such a wonderful master, that he could live like this.

…Huh? There was no answer…right? He did not hear the reply giving him permission to enter. There was no night watch in front of the door and according to the time, Renner should not be asleep yet. Or did she simply fall asleep without informing the person on night duty?

Climb knocked on the door again. This time, he heard a faint voice from inside giving him permission to enter. Climb felt a sense of relief and went inside. What he had to do first had already been decided. "I apologize for being late." He deeply bowed his head.

"I was worried!" The anger was evident in Renner's voice. It was surprising. Climb's master rarely ever got angry. Even if she was insulted, in front of Climb, she showed no signs that she was angry. That was why he understood that Renner had been worried from the bottom of her heart. He felt as if something warm was going to gush out of his eyes. He endured it and bowed his head and sincerely apologized over and over.

"I was really worried! I thought that maybe Eight Fingers attacked first and had done something to Climb and… So what happened, exactly? I received a brief report but can you explain it to me in detail?"

When Climb was about to start speaking while standing up, Renner offered him a seat per usual. Now that he was seated, black tea from the 'Warm Bottle' was poured into the teacup placed in front of him. A faint steam rose into the air. He gave his thanks and drank a gulp of the tea that was at optimal temperature.

Climb told of everything that he went through in the brothel. He said that he was relying on Renner's power and that there were people that he wanted her to aid. "So what did you think when you saw them?" When his story was roughly finished, the first question that Renner asked seemed strange. But as long as he was asked a question, he had to answer.

"I pitied them. I thought that if I was stronger, I could have saved those people before they fell into such suffering."

"So that's how it was… Climb thought of them as pitiful."

"Yes."

“I see. Climb is kind.”

“Renner-sama, if those women require a guard then I am prepared to leave at any time.”

“…I’ll be counting on you when that time comes. More importantly, I should tell you this beforehand. Tomorrow, or two days at the latest, we’re going to attack the facilities that were on the parchment that Lakyus brought in. Because of the attack on the brothel, I predict that they’ll grow more alert as more time passes.”

“I apologize! It’s because I acted on my own!”

“No it’s not, don’t worry about it. Rather, I was able to make my decision thanks to you. Besides, what Climb did is held in extremely high regard. You managed to capture Succulent, a member of Six Arms, and the leader of the slave trade group, Cocco Doll. This should be more than enough to shake up our opponent at the roots. That’s why I want to deliver an additional attack to our enemy.” Renner punched the air, a cute punch with neither power nor speed. “We’ll hit them again before they steal information from the capital!”

“Understood! I’ll rest up and gather my energy for tomorrow!”

“Please. Expect tomorrow to be a fierce day.”

Climb left the room. He seemed to slightly smell of blood.

“It must’ve been hard on you, Climb. Now then…” Renner drank the rest of the black tea that had grown lukewarm and stood from her seat. She made her way to the hand bell. It was a magic item that when shaken, the one in the next room that it was linked to would shake as well. She thought of the face of the maid who was on standby in the next room. Luckily enough, it was that girl’s turn today, thinking so, Renner wore a cold smile.

“Shoot, which face was good here?” Renner stood in front of the mirror and stretched her face up and down while holding her cheeks with both hands. Even if a human like her did something like that, her face would hardly change. What she was doing was something like affirmation.

Renner removed her hands and smiled. “No. This is for when I make my rounds as the princess…” This time, Renner tried a sneer and then another smile. One after another and finally, she wore an innocent smile. “I think this one will be best.” Having determined that she was finished preparing, Renner rang the bell. Immediately after, a maid knocked on the door and entered the room.

“I have a request. Could you prepare me some hot water?”

“Understood, Renner-sama.”

Renner smiled at the maid who was bowing her head. “Did something happen? You seem to be in a good mood. You look as if something pleasant has happened to you.” Renner happily smiled again as she confirmed that the prey took the bait. “Yeah! It’s really incredible! Climb did something amazing!” She spoke like a young girl; perfectly fitting for the foolish princess who coughs up valuable information.

“Congratulations, your Grace.” Although the maid skillfully hid the hostility she had towards Climb, she ended up revealing the feelings that she could not hide. That reaction caused a stir in Renner’s heart.

I’ll kill her.

I’ll kill this maid too.

I’ll kill anyone who looks down on my Climb.

But Renner’s expression showed no signs that she knew the truth. For the current Renner was an innocent princess; the type who was oblivious to the malice of others and who forgives her maid’s rudeness, that kind of naïve— foolish princess.

“It’s amazing! Really amazing! Climb defeated some really, really bad people and freed all of the people who had been captured. Now they should be… um, he said that he left them somewhere in the guard station. Now we can punish the nobles who helped those bad people!”

“I see. That is really amazing. As expected, Renner-sama’s Climb-san is splendid. But could I hear about that incredible thing he did with more detail?”

Stupid girl, Renner spread her poison to the fool who was not even suspicious. She controls everything in the palm of her hand, all in order to obtain the object of her desire.

♦ ♦ ♦

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 22:10

There was a suspicious looking group that looked as if they were melting into the darkness. All of them each wore different equipment and their atmosphere was completely different from that of soldiers. If one had to mention who they smelled the closest to, perhaps it would be adventurers. The one at the front was a man with a rough physique. Next was a lean man along with a woman wearing light silk. A person in a robe followed them from behind and lastly, there was a person wearing full plate armor.

In the direction that the group was staring in, there was a door that was opened wide. The inside was covered in darkness and there was no longer the presence of other people. Even when looking around the surroundings, there did not seem to be any people. This was a strange. All of the goods that were in the brothel had already been seized and transported to one of the stations for soldiers.

However, it was out of the question that they would not leave sentries behind just because there was nothing there. If one were to actually look towards the entrance that was empty of people, they would see a bright bonfire and realize that they were keeping vigil at night. But the reason that no one could be seen was because those people used their authority to temporarily remove the sentries.

The boulder-like man standing at the front— Zero, sent a terrifying gaze to the captured brothel and spoke in a low voice, as if he found it despicable. “What a farce. I’ll have to apologize to Cocco Doll. I lent him Succulent, a member of Six Arms and they still fell this easily. And it was even on the same day… truly, what a farce.”

Zero sent a sharp glare over his shoulder at the snickering that came from behind him. The woman who was wearing the light silk knew Zero's personality well and quickly changed the topic. "Ah, right, right. So boss, what should we do? Do we kill Succulent who got caught? He's at a station so it'll be hard to use force. Then we'd have to borrow an assassin from a different division… what do we do?"

"No, we won't do that. He's still useful. I will request the Count to have him released immediately. …This will become an unexpected expense. Find out the Count's tastes." The thin, frivolous-looking man asked a question. "And Cocco Doll?"

"He will likely use his own connections. If he asks, then we will use our connections as an apology. Also, what happened to the client list? There wasn't any information about it falling into the hands of a patrol officer."

"There has been no news on that front. To be more precise, I haven't heard of any further details on the matter." The voice coming from the robe was dark. It was like an empty echo flowing out of a hole in a graveyard that sent shivers down the spine. "That is something that I am very eager to get my hands on. It can be used to make all kinds of threats."

"Don't say something so stupid. If we kept that with us, it would only make us look more suspicious. Others may think that we had planned for all of this to happen. If we find the list, we will hide it in a safe location and hand it over later to Cocco Doll with an apology. Besides, it's probably written in code that can't be cracked by normal methods so it's useless to us regardless."

At Zero's words, the lean man shrugged his shoulders as he spoke. "Anyways, I'll go in later and try to find out what happened to the list. If they have it, it's probably in a secret safe or something. …With that said, this is pretty amazing. How was this hole made? The weapon… was it magic?"

"It was a fist." Everyone's eyes fell on Zero. He repeated himself, declaring that this imprint was made by a fist. "A fist huh… that's amazing~"

"Foolish. This is nothing." He cut off the woman's admiration and, collecting his breath, Zero stabbed the door with his fist. His hand became lodged in the door as if it was ripping through paper. As Zero slowly pulled out his fist, leaving behind a same hole as the one that Sebas had made.

Looking dumb-founded, the lean man opened his mouth. "You can't really use the boss as a comparison… Well, the enemy had enough skill to pierce through a steel reinforced door and defeat Succulent, even if he's the weakest among the Six Arms. I'm guessing we should consider him to be a formidable foe, right?"

"What nonsense. Just because that guy lost doesn't mean that his opponent was strong." The one who had his hood pulled deeply over his head spoke in a voice filled with ridicule. "If his illusions are seen through, then his battle strength falls greatly beneath ours. He is strong when there is a clear difference in ability between him and his opponent. But if it's similar or he falls behind even slightly, then his defeat is certain. You all should know this as well."

There was faint laughter. It was a laugh that agreed with his comment and at the same time, one of contempt for someone whose skill was beneath them. "With that in mind, let me ask, what do we

do? Are you going to take your hand off the matter? I do not think that clashing will prove beneficial, considering the losses."

"Foolish." Zero's voice was filled with an anger that he could not suppress. "If we don't kill the one who attacked this brothel and set an example, our value will drop. From this point on, don't think about losses. All of Six Arms will step forward and kill the invader— 'Immortal King' Davernoc."

The one wearing the robe held out his hand. The hand that did not belong to a living person was firmly grasping an orb. The orb responded to the emotions of its owner and exuded a strange aura.

"'Void Executioner' Peysilian." The one in full plate armor who had been silent until now beat his fist against his chest and the loud sound of metal rang out.

"'Dancing Scimitar' Edstrom." With the ringing of the metal bangle around her arm, the woman wearing the light silk gracefully bowed her head.

"'Thousand Kills' Malmvist." The lean man brought his heels together with a click.

"And I, 'Battle Demon' Zero!" As if in agreement, those around Zero all nodded their head. "First, we pay the bail on Succulent and the others who were arrested and gather information. Once that is done… arrange for people who know how to torture. We will show the invader hell. He will greatly regret his foolishness!"

♦ ♦ ♦

Month of Descending Fire (Month 9), Day 3, 17:42

By the time Sebas had finished everything and was heading back to the mansion, the sun had already begun to set. *Climb-kun protected the ones that were being held captive and Succulent and the owner of the brothel were all arrested. It seems they will be quite busy so it should buy a bit of time.* Then what was he to do with Tsuare? The best option was to take her somewhere safe. However, as far as Sebas knew, only one place fit that description.

While worrying over it, Sebas arrived at the residence. He stopped his hand as he was about to open the door. There was someone on the other side close by. Although this presence belonged to Solution, he could not understand why she was standing right in front of the entrance. Was it an emergency?

Feeling uneasy, Sebas opened the door. What he saw next was so unexpected that he grew rigid. "Welcome back. Sebas-sama." It was Solution wearing her maid uniform. A shiver ran down Sebas' back. While acting as the daughter of a merchant, in this house where a human whose circumstances were unknown — Tsuare — existed, Solution was wearing her maid uniform. Was it because the act was no longer necessary? Or did a reason that required her to be in her maid uniform appear? If it was the former, then it meant that something had happened to Tsuare. If it was the latter—

"Sebas-sama, Ainz-sama is waiting for you."

Sebas heard Solution's quiet voice and felt his heartbeat grow louder. He who was calm in the face of a powerful enemy, in front of a Guardian class existence, that Sebas now grew nervous at the news of his master's arrival. "W-Why…" He squeezed out his words, as if his tongue was twisted. Solution stared at that Sebas without saying a word.

"Sebas-sama, Ainz-sama is waiting for you."

There was nothing else that needed to be said. Her demeanor said as much. Sebas followed behind Solution and began to walk. Those steps were heavy, like the steps of a condemned criminal heading to his executioner.

Afterword

I am the author, Maruyama Kugane. In the blink of an eye, Overlord has already published its fifth volume. Thank you to all of my readers who have been supportive of this series. Thank you everyone.

Since the fifth volume and the sixth volume are two parts of a single piece, I wonder if an afterword is actually necessary? Thus I have discussed this matter with editor-sama, and in the end editor-sama said that there should be some readers who look forward to the afterword and hope that I write one… there are people who look forward to reading the afterword… right? Is the kind of stuff in the afterword interesting to read? Hm… editor-sama's words do make sense, or perhaps he wants me to dig up from somewhere something interesting to write about?

An interesting thing… in order to deal with many various matters relating to the fifth volume and the sixth volume, from August to the end of November I had spent every holiday huddled up at home to rush out this book… that's the only thing I can think of.

Not only that, because just like the fourth volume, the sixth volume also has a special edition which comes with a Drama CD, the publishing process became even more compact than normal. It was really killing me…

That's what it's like as a part-time writer! Huh. Not one bit… interesting. All it does is simply shatter everyone's dreams. Let's change the topic.

At the same time as Overlord there is also a new web novel. However, after the release of the sixth volume, at least 90% will be original material. Originally, when I had the intention of rewriting the Web novel version as a book, I had to possibly supplement it with some brand new elements. This kind of thought has taken shape in the next volume.

The work itself has already been finalized. So long as there are no incidents, it should be available for sale in January 2014, and I hope to see everyone again in the in the afterword of that volume.

With that, let me get to the part where I credit others. So-bin-sama for the book illustrations, Chord Design Studio which is responsible for the design work. Osako-sama who is responsible for the proofreading and editing, F-tan-sama the editor, and the various individuals who assisted in the production works. Thank you everybody. There is also Honey, thank you so much for your help.

Finally, I would like to give my sincerest thanks to all of my readers who show up to purchase this book!

December 2013, Maruyama Kugane

Character 17

セバス・チャン

Heteromorphic
Race

sebas tian

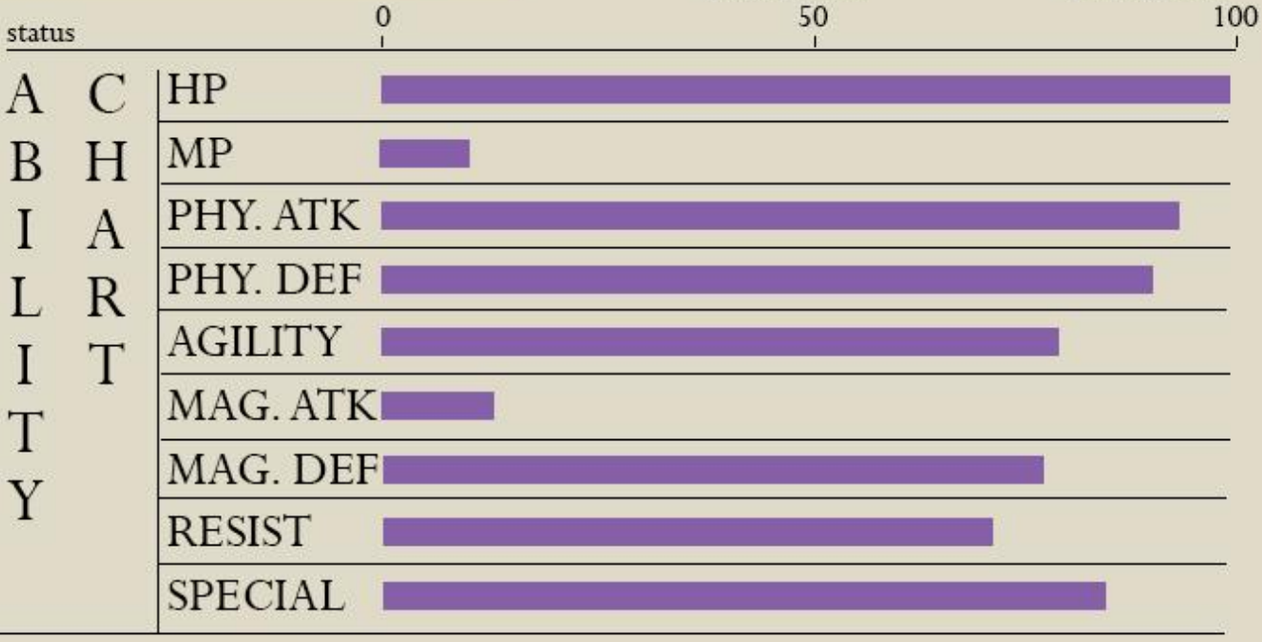
Butler of Steel

Job	Great Tomb of Nazarick Butler	
Residence	One of the servant's room in basement 9	
Alignment	Great Good	Sense of Justice: 300
Racial Level	Unknown	
Job Level	Monk	10 lv
	Martial King	10 lv
	Striker	5 lv
	Inner Ki Master	15 lv
	Outer Ki Master	5 lv
	Others	

[Racial level] + [Job level] Total 100 level

Racial level — Job level

Total 25 level — Total 75 level



ソリュシャン・イプシロン

Heteromorphic
Race

solution• ε

Dissolving Cage

Job	Great Tomb of Nazarick Battle Maid	
Residence	One of the servant's room in basement 9	
Alignment	Great Evil	Sense of Justice: -400
Racial Level	Shoggoth	10 lv
	Ubbo-Sathla	10 lv
Job Level	Assassin	2 lv
	Poison Maker	4 lv
	Master Assassin	1 lv
	Others	

[Racial level] + [Job level] Total 57 level

Racial level — Total 45 level

Job level — Total 12 level

ABILITY CHART

status

	0	50	100
HP			
MP			
PHY. ATK			
PHY. DEF			
AGILITY			
MAG. ATK			
MAG. DEF			
RESIST			
SPECIAL			

クライム

Human
Race

climb

Loyal Dog

Job	Soldier of the Kingdom	
Residence	Ro-Lante Castle	
Job Level	Fighter	? lv
	Guardian	? lv
Birthday	Unknown (The day he was picked up by Renner)	
Hobby	Collecting stories of Heroes	

{ personal character }

The young man picked up by the 'Golden' princess. Equipped with the pure white full body armour bestowed to him by Renner, he uses a sword and shield. He has a hardworking nature with a passionate attitude, swearing to protect Renner with his life. To be of use to Renner, he practice his swordsmanship without fail everyday. Despite his efforts, he lacks talent in swordsmanship which frustrates him to no end. Due to Renner's special treatment, he is not close to anyone but her.

ラナー・ティエール・シャルドルン・ライル・ヴァイセルフ

Human Race

reneer theiere chardelon ryle vaiself

Golden Princess

Job	Princess	
Residence	Ro-Lante Castle	
Job Level	Princess (common)	? lv
	Actress (common)	? lv
Birthday	Top Fire month 7th day	
Hobby	Watching Climb	

{ personal character }

Kingdom of Ro-Lante Princess with flowing light blonde hair eyes like blue jewels. Her beauty earned her the title 'Golden' Bards rushed to sing for her, stories praising her beauty numbered as many as the stars. Apart from her beauty, she is dedicated to the citizens, instrumental in policy reforms such as the abolishment of slavery, showing her brillance in the political platform. She is kind, gentle and charitable, shining brightly just like a princess should. But—

ガゼフ・ストロノーフ

Human
Race

gazef stronoff

Strongest Warrior in the Kingdom

Job	Warrior Captain of the Kingdom	
Residence	Royal Capital	
Job Level	Fighter	? lv
	Mercenery	? lv
	Champion	? lv
	Others	
Birthday	Mid Earth month 21st day	
Hobby	Saving money	

{ personal character }

The strongest warrior renowned in the Kingdom and the neighbouring nations. Other than the nobles, his reputation preceeded him among the people of all nationalities. He came from a family of commoners and became a royal vassal after defeating Brain in a fighting tournament. Ever since then, he had dedicated himself to the king, his loyalty and honour was stronger than anyone else. He was extremely talented with the sword, but had yet to overcome the barrier to reach the realm of 'heroes'. He had southern blood in his veins which was shown in his hair and eye colour.

ブレイン・アングラウス

Human
Race

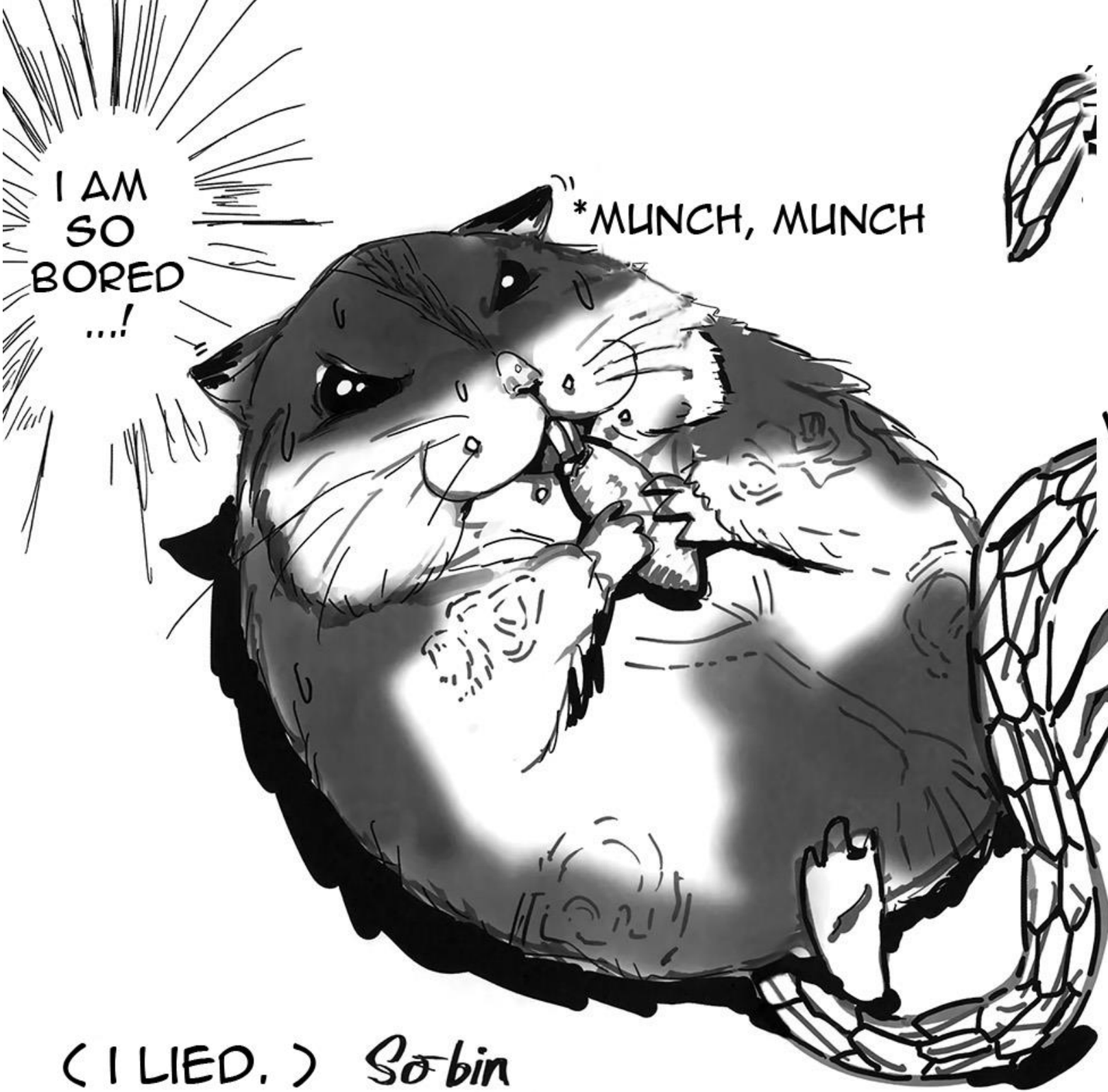
brain unglaus

Seeker of Martial Prowess

Job	Nil	
Residence	Nil	
Job Level	Genius Fighter	? lv
	Sword Master	? lv
	Sword Saint	? lv
	Others	
Birthday	Mid Wind month 10th day	
Hobby	Sword training (Anything that improves his skills)	

{ personal character }

Sword Genius. Is very greedy in improving his skills. Has the capability of fighting on par with the strongest warrior of the Kingdom Gazef, and sees him as a rival, working without rest to train in the arts of a warrior. His fight with Shalltear showed him overwhelming power, the shock of never reaching that peak of power made him lose all drive and became a shell of his former self. Unexpectedly, he loves shopping, but he do so in order to purchase items that will make him stronger.



NEXT VOLUME, WE TAKE A LOOK AT HAMSUKE'S LIVING ENVI-RONMENT, WHICH IS WRAPPED UP IN VEIL OF MYSTERY....!!

Postscript by So-bin

(I LIED.) So-bin